JOHN CREASEY
The Smog
A Dr. Palfrey Mystery

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The Smog

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Part I

The Menace

Chapter One

Bright Morning

As dawn broke, the air was so clear that distant hills could be seen, tall and soft breasted, in a clarity of outline which came, perhaps, once a year; certainly no more than twice or thrice. And to greet the dawn the birds, blue jay and sparrow, house-martin, thrush and eager starling, woke earlier and sang more loudly – unless it was that the air carried the sound more distinctly so that it seemed louder.

Only two people were up at dawn that day, one too busy to greet it, the other too preoccupied. One, Grace Drummond, with her husband and three children to get up, feed and make ready for the day, had little time for welcoming the morning. Yet, even beset by duties, when she opened the kitchen window to shake the crumbs off the tablecloth, she was almost startled by the closeness of the hills, though she knew them to be thirty miles away.

The other was David Costain, a clear if slow thinking man, regarded locally as a gentleman farmer, on his morning milk delivery and heading for the Manor, where they seemed to drink more milk than the rest of the villagers' frugal half-pints put together.

"No doubt the two women bathe in it!" quipped the postman Worral. "Good for the complexion I hear tell, and both rivals, I shouldn't wonder, for the Professor's attention!"

And Worral – pronounced Wurrall so that his nickname of Worry-guts was almost automatic – had gone up the hill, laughing uproariously at his own joke.

Costain turned his small van into the driveway of the Manor, aware of but not consciously thinking of the changes which had taken place in this house in the last few years. For one thing, the big iron gates, beautifully wrought three centuries ago, had been cleaned and restored and coated with a flat paint which showed them at their best. The banks on either side were trim, now. Joe Taylor was as proud of his mowing machines as if he owned them, instead of working for the Professor and living in a converted barn really fit only for cows. The drive, too, was weedless.

"Never seen a weed killer like it," Joe had boasted at the Sparrow Hawk, the only inn within miles of the village – but compensatingly near its heart, opposite the tiny Norman church, with its castellated tower and age-old stone walls. "Spread the mix one day, next day the weeds be dying, day after

that they be gone. Like magic it were."

Joe Taylor, so proud of his new-found job of gardener and handyman at the Manor, talked at the drop of the hat about the tools, the grounds, the house itself, but seldom about the Professor or his staff, if staff was the word for them. There were four people besides the Professor living in the house; an elderly man, a young man who moved about most of the time in a wheel chair and two young women; sisters. No one knew but the village guessed that both were in their twenties. No one knew but the village guessed with a mixture of prurience and excitement, that one or the other or both of these were the Professor's mistresses.

No one knew …

That was true about everything except the obvious things, since Professor Storr, an American, had bought the Manor. There had been great excitement when he had first arrived, with loads of furniture and carpets large enough to spread from wall to wall even in those huge rooms. Gradually the excitement had died down, as the women in the village became reconciled to the disappointment of finding that no domestic help was needed. The new occupants, it appeared, looked after themselves, so it was assumed that some, at least, were 'staff'.

"They don't mean to allow anybody to see what goes on there," one of the once-hopeful women had said darkly.

Certainly no one knew.

David Costain reached the point of the drive where it branched left towards the side and back entrances, and slowed down as he always did, because the view of the Manor from there was so beautiful. Built of local stone, against a line of pines, it stood three stories high on the crest of a hill overlooking the village and the surrounding countryside. This was Southern England at its agricultural loveliest.

The drive swept round, towards the porticoed front door, the grass before it trim and closely cut.

The air, this far above the village, seemed absolutely clear; as if all the dust and the mist, the insects and the pollen, had been drawn out of it. Costain lingered, then was about to put on speed when he saw one of the upstairs windows open. Marion, one of the young women, was standing there deeply breathing in the morning air. Costain could see the upper part of her body, naked and beautiful enough to make him catch his breath.

He was early today; perhaps she did this every morning, without fear of being seen; certainly she was quite oblivious, and Costain did not know what best to do. If he raced the engine she would realise that he was there, a Peeping Tom for all she knew; but if he did nothing, and she or one of the others saw him, what would they do but be sure he had come – or at least stayed – to stare?

Uncertain, held by an unwilling fascination, he could see the rise and fall of her breasts, as if she were challenging the day while filling herself with the pristine sweetness of the air itself.

At last, she drew back and closed the window.

David Costain, in his early forties, ten years a widower, sat in the pale-yellow cart, still seeing, in his mind's eye, the body of Marion Kemble.

At last, slowly, wishing the engine to silence, he eased off the brake, went on his way, delivered his milk and then moved across to the barn, where several empty bottles were in yesterday's wire cage. More often than not, he saw Joe Taylor, but it was barely half-past six and usually he was not here until after seven.

Today was a special day; he was going to the cemetery.

He had debated with himself, for the past two weeks, whether to make the annual pilgrimage or to give it up at last. He no longer felt the deep hurt, still less the anguish, of the first few years, although there had been a time when he had thought forgetfulness, even for a few hours, impossible. Yet here, in Sane village, he had won through to a certain relief from the nagging remorse – not for anything he had done but for what he had not done.

It was his terrible and unescapable fear that he might have been responsible for the death of his wife and their three children.

Doctors had told him not to be a fool; so had relatives and so had friends; but even now, thinking about what had happened, he felt the ache of the old agony. He *must* forget it!

He had a dozen more calls to make and the glimpse of Marion at the window had delayed him, so to be in time he must hurry. There was one bus, which would leave at seven-thirty sharp and enable him to catch the eight-fifteen train from Winchester to London. He must not sink into one of his old moods of melancholy which, sad and hampering, always slowed him down.

As he left the grounds of the Manor and turned sharply uphill towards the hamlet beyond, Upper Sane, he was caught once more by the almost unbelievable clarity of the morning, and when he reached the top of the hill and looked over the countryside, the picture was so breathtaking that yet again he paused.

"Anyone would think I want to miss that train," he said aloud; but once the significance of what he had said struck home, he began to do everything with determined speed. If he ever stopped this anniversary visit to the dead it would be deliberately, not the result of some half-sensed subconscious desire.

Almost at the same moment that David Costain made his purposeful speed, Grace Drummond dropped an egg and it cracked, smashed on the edge of the stove, splattering a sticky trail down her dress. Exasperated, she decided she would have to change it, and there was so little time, at the most fifteen minutes before leaving the house. Then suddenly Geoffrey's arms were round her waist, his strong fingers pressing against her in an oft-used, familiar, heartwarming way.

"Oh, Geoff, *don't!*"

"I certainly shall," he said, gaily, making no attempt to lessen his hold. "It

would happen this morning! A hundred leisurely mornings and not a cracked egg! One with a train to catch, and this—" His head was thrust over her shoulder, his unshaven cheek was rough against hers. "Leave it, darling, I'll clean it up and although you'd never admit it I scramble quite an eatable egg."

He let her go.

She twisted round and gave him a hug and a touch of her lips, before she fled, her mind already deciding that it would have to be the yellow linen dress again, she never seemed to wear anything else when she went to London. She heard giggling, from the two girls, and then a loud: "That's mine!" from Geoffrey II. As she reached the main bedroom Geoffrey, older than the girls by two years, stormed onto the landing. "Mummy! They've taken my Napoleon hat again, they know I hate them playing with it!"

Because of her hurry, it would have been easy to be sharp with him, or at least peremptory, but he looked so forlorn, a little ugly duckling of a child, fair hair hanging almost into his eyes, his mouth quivering in lines of despair.

"Mary-Jane!" She called. She often made the two names sound like one, as now, and from the time they had begun to share their twin secrets, and go off together, they had responded as one. They did now, two pyjama clad figures, one with hair dropping to her shoulders, the other with it cut much shorter, the only certain way of telling them apart for most of the village, the school and even close friends.

"Yes …"

"Mummy?"

They would answer together, one with one word, one the other, and she wasn't quite sure whether, at the age of seven, they were beginning to do this out of mischief rather than from habit.

"Give Geoffrey back his hat," she ordered, "and don't touch it again. You're both on your honour while I'm away." She was sure she could rely on them.

She had not dreamed of the reaction.

"Away!" gasped Mary.

"You're going away?" cried Jane.

"Mummy, can I come?" pleaded Geoffrey II with sudden inspiration.

And then Geoffrey I came bounding up the stairs, as lithe and energetic at thirty-five as a man ten years younger. How could so handsome and virile a man have sired a son so plain as Geoffrey II? His chestnut-brown eyes were glowing as he lifted his two daughters in one arm and his son in the other, and at the same time roared: "No one's going with Mummy today but you're all three coming with me—I'll take you to school. Mummy has about ten minutes to catch her bus."

After nine of those minutes had passed in frantic rush she raced out of the house and along the lane towards the bus stop. At every step there was a cry.

"Goodbye, Mummy!"

"Bring me something back."

"Can we come and meet you?"

She reached the corner and turned, to see them all waving, Mary and Jane perched on Geoffrey's shoulders, Geoffrey II standing on the garden gate, the Napoleon hat squarely on his head. In one way she was glad that her husband was home all day. He was, he told her, writing a scientific book, based on experiments he was making in the garden shed – but writing it as vaguely and casually as a more than adequate private income allowed him. His interests were many – geology, agriculture; anything that took his fancy. Grace reached the bus stop, still smiling, as happy as she had been for a long time. Only one man was waiting there, and she didn't, at first, recognise David Costain in the well-cut suit and trilby hat.

"Good morning, Mrs. Drummond. You catching the London train, too?"

"Yes. I don't think I've ever seen you on the bus before," she said, and then laughed. "Not on any one of the four times a year that I catch it."

He smiled, and she thought: He's much better-looking than I realised.

Then the bus came in sight and they stood in companionable silence until they got on, when they sat opposite each other, paid their fares, and then gradually became absorbed in the beauty of the morning.

They were walking along the platform at Waterloo, two of hundreds, mostly hurrying, when the first wisp of yellowish fog showed in the village of Sane.

The first child coughed; and the first child cried from pain which stung his eyes.

Chapter Two

Dark Night

"Did you have a good day?" Grace Drummond asked, as they met at the main bookstall at Waterloo to catch the six o'clock train that evening. It was twenty minutes to six and a queue was already forming. They moved towards it through the throng of office homegoers who were free for a few brief hours.

David Costain hesitated, and then said: "It went very well."

He means he didn't enjoy it, Grace thought. She wondered where he had been and why he was subdued, noticing a quality in him which sometimes showed on the surface and then was lost. The journey up had been pleasant enough; small talk, village talk, Manor talk, Professor Storr talk, rumour talk – he shied off the scandal about the Professor and his *ménage à trois* – a little cautious political talk which neither allowed to range too far; he seemed independent in his attitudes. Struck as she had been that morning by his severe good looks, the high-bridged Roman nose, the very clearly defined shape of his lips, the clarity of his grey eyes, the short cut fair hair which hid the encroaching grey, she wondered about him.

Their carriage was now overfull of City men, mostly known to one another, who talked with the half-jocular half-gloomy attitude of their kind, their united opinion being that Britain was going to the dogs.

"I'd make the lazy beggars work," one of them growled. "We could do with a one man government for a few years. A benevolent dictatorship would do the trick, with a single slogan. 'If you don't work you can't eat'."

"Hard on wives and children," murmured an elderly man who had said less than anyone else.

"If a man marries and has children, they're *his* responsibility," growled the advocate of benevolent dictatorship. "Not the State's."

Grace was looking at Costain, expecting at the very least a raised eyebrow or a hint of a smile. Instead, he closed his eyes, as if to lessen some painful mental thrust. That he was merely pretending to doze, she could see full well.

Suddenly, the others in the compartment began to shift in their seats, rise, take hats and umbrellas from the rack above them, put magazines and papers into their briefcases and tuck these under their arms. The train slowed down, a voice over a loudspeaker called: "Basingstoke!" The door opened and all but Costain and Grace Drummond leapt to the platform, joining the hurrying crowd of similarly dressed men.

Costain opened his eyes and stretched his legs.

"I'd forgotten the exodus here," he remarked.

"Strange to think that it happens every day," said Grace. "I couldn't live like it." She wondered if he would talk, now that they were alone, and was glad when the guard's whistle blew and doors slammed and the train began

to move. It was only about twenty minutes, to Winchester. “What did you think of our benevolent dictator?” she asked lightly.

“He’d probably be the first to join a resistance group,” Costain said drily. “Did you get everything you wanted?”

“Nearly everything,” she answered. “I don’t think Geoffrey II—” as in the family she pronounced that Geoffrey two – “will be very pleased, I couldn’t get anything new for him. He collects hats! Mary and Jane are always happy with dolls, I’ve a Japanese one for—”

She broke off, for she saw that hurt expression on his face again, and realised that it must have been the benevolent dictator’s phrase about a man’s responsibilities to his children which had hurt him before. She felt abashed and wished she hadn’t chatted on so superficially about her own children.

He said quietly: “I’ve been on an annual pilgrimage, to the cemetery where—where my family is buried. I—oh, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t—”

“Please,” she begged, leaning forward, “please tell me.”

So he told her.

How, ten years before he had almost decided to buy a new car; how, because of it, he had not had his old one fully tested. How his wife and their three children, two boys and a girl, had gone out in the car and the brakes had failed on a steep hill near their home.

“The car caught fire,” he said. “Exploded, and caught fire.”

He spread his hands, still looking at her, and she was bereft of words. Perhaps there were no words to use, on such an occasion. But – dear God – how she could feel for him! How she realised what he felt, why the word ‘responsibility’ had hit him so savagely. The train was moving very fast, the undulating fields of Hampshire sweeping past, but neither of them looked out of the window.

Suddenly, Costain went on: “I don’t think I’ll go again. Not as a—” he hesitated.

“Penance,” she said.

“*You* see that?” he asked, astonished.

“Of course I do,” Grace answered. “Geoffrey II was nearly run over by a car in Winchester one day. I let him walk on his own instead of holding his hand. If anything had—” she broke off, only to go on: “I couldn’t sleep for nights afterwards—” she broke off.

“What did you do?” she asked a moment later.

“I’d been in the Navy,” he answered, “and took a job with a coastal freighter, as second engineer. I wanted to get away, but you can’t run away from yourself. Then I—well, the only thing that helped for a while was physical labour and I knew a little about farming, so I bought Sane Farm, and I’ve been there quite a few years now.”

“Keeping yourself very much to yourself,” she observed. “You really mustn’t, you know.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” he murmured.

“I know there aren’t many people in the village, but it’s surprising how

many are in the neighbourhood, within a few miles." She paused, considering. "If we have a cocktail party—and it's past time we did, it must be six months since our last—will you come? You've got to break the ice," she urged.

"You're very—thoughtful," he replied. "Yes. Yes, I'd like to very much."

"Wonderful! And I'll try to get Professor Storr and his household. *That* would really be a triumph!"

They both laughed, quite happily, and only then noticed that the train was pulling into Winchester. Grace picked up her handbag and peered out of the window. Geoffrey would be here; probably all four of them would be, Geoff II on one side of their father, the twins on the other.

There was no sign of anyone at all.

"I wonder what's up," said Costain, as they moved along the train corridor.

"Oh, someone called at the last minute, I suppose," said Grace.

"I don't mean your husband—I mean the policemen."

"Police?" echoed Grace, "oh, I see what you mean. If the police want somebody off the train probably they're not letting anyone else onto the platform."

She glanced curiously at the four policemen, a sergeant and three constables, gathered in a loose cordon about the ticket collector's barrier. As David Costain helped her down from the corridor and they moved together towards the barrier, two men with cameras moved sharply forward.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Drummond."

"Stand still a moment, Mr. Costain, please."

"What—" Costain began.

"Cold hearted baskets," one of the policemen muttered, and quite suddenly all four of the men in uniform gathered about Grace and Costain, as if to shield them from the photographers. Puzzled, at a loss, Grace glanced up at Costain.

What she saw struck horror through her, reflected from the horror on his face. He actually drew back, and put a hand up to his eyes. Then the sergeant, an elderly man with a clipped grey moustache, said in a tone touched unmistakably with anguish: "You've heard nothing, then."

"Heard about *what?*" cried Grace.

The sergeant said as if to himself: "Of course they haven't." Then he braced himself and went on in a flat voice: "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Drummond …" *Sorry, very sorry, why?* … "We tried to get in touch with you." *Why, why, why?* Grace was standing rigid, staring, hardly aware that David Costain was gripping her arm tightly. "Something happened in the village," the sergeant said. *Oh, God, Geoffrey. The children. Oh, God, no.* "No one knows exactly what it was, Ma'am, but—everyone died."

Died.

Everyone.

Everyone in Sane –

Oh, God, no! Not the children!

“Superintendent Devine or Chief Inspector Wall were to have been here, ma’am, but they had some last minute instructions from the Chief Constable. So I had to come. I’m very sorry, madam. I can’t say how—”

“Sergeant,” Grace interrupted in a voice which sounded strange even to herself, “are you telling me that my—my family has been wiped out?”

“All—all the village,” the sergeant blurted out miserably, and then his face brightened and he turned towards the ticket collector’s barrier with unmistakable relief. “Here is Superintendent Devine.”

Grace did not hear what he said. The full realisation came to her with sudden, awful truth, as if a monstrous shadow, formed out of nowhere, was pressing against her whole body with a force which seemed to crush her head, her heart, her vitals. One of the policemen moved forward but it was David Costain who put his arm round her shoulders and saved her from falling. He was still holding her when a man he had seen once or twice when in Winchester came forward; this was obviously Superintendent Devine.

“Dr. Wingate’s outside,” he said to the sergeant. “He will look after Mrs. Drummond. Thank you, Mr. Costain, for your presence of mind.” He eased the woman away from Costain and two constables half carried her, while cameras whirred and clicked on both sides of the barrier.

“Are you Mr. Devine?” asked Costain in a low-pitched voice.

“Superintendent Devine. I—”

“What the hell has your sergeant been talking about?” Costain was very pale: as pale as Grace Drummond. “The whole village can’t be dead.”

“I’m afraid it’s true, sir,” Devine asserted. He was a tall, rather plump-looking man, dressed in loose fitting pepper and salt tweeds. “Except for those who were away, or were on high ground. Would you mind telling me why you went to London today, sir?”

The question came sharply, and Devine’s eyes, rather unimpressive until that moment, suddenly became very bleak, and their gaze penetrating.

Costain did not reply for a long time. He was aware of glances, avid, compassionate, or averted, of cameras cocked, of pencils poised, but none of these things seemed to matter. Only what he had been told had any meaning at all, and that was a nightmare meaning. The whole village – dead? It was a crazy joke, an insane –

Nonsense: this was no joke; these men were policemen.

“Mr. Costain, I asked you a question—”

“And I’ll answer it when we’re not being overheard,” Costain said sharply. “I still can’t believe—” he broke off, for it was useless to say that, useless to protest. “Where will you take Mrs. Drummond?”

“She will be well looked after, sir.”

“That’s not good enough,” said Costain sharply. “I want to know where she is being taken, who is going to look after her.”

“Is that any special concern of yours, sir?” Devine asked.

There was another short pause, in which Costain felt the stirring of anger, anger which grew rather than faded, which made him very resentful indeed.

He stared coldly into the superintendent's face, and said with great precision: "That is an insolent question, Superintendent. I resent it very much indeed and I insist on being told what is being done for Mrs. Drummond. Have her parents been informed? Or her husband's? Where *is* she, now?"

He was acutely aware of Devine staring back at him almost defiantly, and could not understand his expression or his manner. His anger rose. There was no reason for such behaviour, Devine was behaving almost as if he were a suspect, not a man who had just received a shock great enough to flatten him.

A – *suspect?*

"I'm sorry if I caused you offence, sir," said Devine perfunctorily. "Perhaps it would be better if we went along to the station, we can deal with all matters there."

With that, it seemed to Costain, there was no doubt at all: the police were hostile. He could not even begin to imagine why, and was not at all sure that he would do what Devine asked. Because of his anger, he wanted time to decide and he stood unmoving, isolated. He had a strong impression that if he refused to do what Devine asked, he would be taken to the police station whether he liked it or not.

Chapter Three

Costain

He had to decide in the next few seconds.

He was aware of changes in his attitude, not only in the past few days but in the past few minutes. His mind worked more quickly even though he did not show it, the habit of keeping one's thoughts to oneself died hard. He was aware of Devine's almost accusing, certainly aggressive manner, of the newspapermen, of the photographers.

"I would like to see Mrs. Drummond," he said very clearly. "After that, I will go home. I will answer any questions there."

Devine noticeably stiffened.

"I'm afraid you can't go home, sir. The whole village is contam—is under supervision. It really would be better if you were to come with me."

Now the man had a reasonable argument. Costain had to go somewhere. But before he answered the significance of the answer swept down upon him. "The whole village is contam—is under supervision." What had he started to say? Con-con-*contaminated,* that was obviously the word. Now facts drove home with increasing force. Contaminated – the whole village wiped out – gas – poison gas. *Plague area!* He felt himself going pale as reaction set in, and he moistened his lips.

"All right, I'll come with you," he said, and added with sharp petulance: "But I don't see why you're so mysterious about Mrs. Drummond."

Devine, only a foot or two away, pretended not to hear, but immediately made a conciliatory move.

"We've kept a room for you at a hotel, sir."

"Oh." This was another, lesser shock; he couldn't get into his cottage, couldn't get his clothes, razor, anything he needed, and he had left that morning with only the clothes he was standing up in. Hardly recovered from the realisation of this, he got into the police car just outside the railway station entrance and dropped back heavily into his seat. He closed his eyes and suddenly a picture of the sudden crisis of years ago swam before him.

A policeman had come to his office, stiff-tongued.

"*I'm sorry to have some bad news for you, sir.*"

There was not the slightest thought of what the bad news could be in his mind.

"*Bad news. What kind of—*"

Then he had realised; then he had begun to realise –

"*Oh, God!*" *he had groaned then –*

"Oh, God!" he groaned now, and buried his face in his hands.

For the first time, Devine showed a glimpse of sympathy. Something touched Costain's hands.

"Have a little brandy, sir."

Brandy. One always flew to brandy when in shock. He was shaking and the glass mouth of the flask chattered against his teeth, but that could have

been the movement of the car. He sipped, paused, felt warmth creeping over him and sipped again. He handed the flask back.

"Thanks."

"A nasty shock, sir." Devine was continuing in his more kindly mood and vaguely Costain wondered what had caused the change.

Costain straightened up, already feeling more bold. "Superintendent, what is all the mystery about Mrs. Drummond?"

"No mystery, sir. We knew in advance what a terrible shock she would have, and made arrangements to have her looked after. Dr. Wingate arranged for a room in a private nursing home, where there is staff night and day and she can be helped as much as possible. Her parents are dead, sir —and Mr. Drummond's parents live in Australia. They went there to retire a few years ago."

"I see," said Costain.

It did not explain the refusal to tell him where she was, but the brandy had soothed him, made him more tolerant. He leaned back and closed his eyes – and again his thoughts and his emotions flew back over the years. He thought – he had actually told himself – he was over it, that he would not *feel* any more, but in an awful way it was even worse because it had happened to him so long ago yet had happened to him again today. He opened his eyes and the picture faded.

Devine held out a cigarette case.

"Cigarette, sir?"

"I don't smoke, thanks. Is there—is there any reason why I shouldn't go straight to the hotel?"

"We won't keep you long at the station, sir."

"I don't understand—" Costain began, and then saw the new red brick police station building. It was useless to argue, and he no longer felt personal resentment; what resentment he did feel was because of Devine's attitude over Grace Drummond, not because of himself. If he couldn't go to his cottage, then it did not greatly matter how long he stayed at the police station. The brandy had quietened his nerves remarkably, no doubt because he wasn't used to it these days.

Devine got out first and they went in.

"If you'll wait here for a few minutes, sir, I'll check some reports." Devine said, opening the door of a small, pleasantly modern waiting room. A sergeant was close by. "See that Mr. Costain gets everything he requires, sergeant, including coffee. I won't keep you long, sir," Devine added, and went off.

But to Costain it seemed a long time; every minute was an age, now that it was a question of just sitting alone with his thoughts, remembering. The whole village, wiped out; people from a year old child to a man in his eighties, all gone. And it meant there was nothing for him to do, or virtually nothing. A new thought stabbed through him when a policeman brought coffee. His animals would be gone, six cows, two pigs, a dozen or so fowl, and –

Sheppy.

Sheppy.

He could feel the cold muzzle of the old sheep dog, now – black, cold, eager. He could see the black and white of the soft, smooth fur, and feel the velvety softness of the long ears. Tears were hot against his eyes, and he stood up and clenched his fists and began to pace the room.

Why the devil were they keeping him so long? He had been here for over half an hour, the coffee was cold, he was beginning to shiver. If they kept him much longer he would open the door and demand to see Devine, if he wasn't interviewed immediately after that, he would simply go home.

Go home –

He dropped into a chair, feeling sick.

Upstairs in Superintendent Devine's office was a man who, even sitting back in a modern but comfortable armchair, looked tall. And with him was Captain Hunt, a youthful-looking officer of the Intelligence Corps, the man in charge of security at Fulton Experimental Research Centre. He was smaller, more compact, more vigorous-looking than the other two, for Devine managed to look bovine whether he was sitting or standing, and the tall man had a preoccupied frown on his broad forehead, very thin and silky fair hair, a rather prominent nose and an insignificant chin. He was so utterly relaxed that it was hard to realise what had brought him here.

"So you're absolutely certain there is no leakage from Fulton?" this man asked.

"I've told you, Dr. Palfrey, it is carbon monoxide with sulphur dioxide, and there is no experimentation at Fulton with either. Absolutely none. This could not have come from Fulton, sir."

"Or you would have fallen down on your job," the fair-haired Dr. Palfrey remarked.

"That is not the reason for my certainty, Dr. Palfrey." The officer's voice was cold with resentment.

"Or else you might have been misinformed," said Dr. Palfrey mildly. "Research scientists have been known to experiment with gases and bacteria although not authorised to do so."

"That is not the case here, sir."

"Ah," said Palfrey, and added as if to himself: "What it is to be so sure." He rose to his feet with curiously feline ease and speed, towering over Hunt. Unexpectedly, he proffered his hand. As unexpectedly, his hand clasp was very firm, hinting of considerable physical strength. "And you will be careful to say only one thing to the Press, won't you?" He smiled, apologetically. "Just that inquiries are pending."

"I understand, sir. You do realise that such an answer will mean that Fulton will come under suspicion."

"Inevitably," murmured Palfrey.

"It's hardly fair, sir, if—"

"Questions in the House, loud-voiced disapproval from anti-Government

newspapers, more outbreaks of paint daubing with the word 'plague spot' everywhere. I understand only too well, Captain. But I am afraid it is unavoidable. The moment a different story can be released you will be told."

His smile, now, was one of dismissal.

Captain Hunt, who had received instructions from Whitehall that he must do everything Palfrey ordered, was none the less indignant – and perhaps the more so because the 'or you would have fallen down on your job' had stung very sharply. Of course that possibility had been in his mind, any man who took pride in his efficiency would have felt the same. And as for the idea that he might have been misinformed – Hunt wondered, uneasily, how much he did know of what went on at Fulton, and he also knew that if there had been a leakage from there everyone concerned would want to hush it up.

Except, presumably, this Dr. Palfrey.

Who the hell *was* Palfrey?

He knew part of the answer, of course – just as Devine, now sitting behind his flat-topped desk, knew a little. That Palfrey was the head of an organisation known as Z5. That its origins lay in the British and later, during World War II, in the Allied Secret Service, but that it was much more widespread now and had a very different purpose from that of protecting the interests of any nation or group of nations. It was a Secret Service of the world, to which all nations – even those warring against one another – contributed funds. For in the age of the nuclear bomb, when one submarine armed with nuclear warheads could wipe out the cities of a nation or half a hemisphere: when there were bacteria of such dreadful contagious effect that the plagues of history became in comparison only epidemics, a constant watchdog was needed.

Nation watched nation.

Palfrey and Z5 watched individuals; watched phenomena which could not be accounted for by any known national activity, for the small group of wealthy men who could pay genius to seek out ways of destruction so that their money could acquire even greater power; and tiny political groups to the extreme right or the extreme left who sought to rule a nation and would, once in control, begin to seek out other nations to conquer.

There was no definition of the authority or the duties of Z5; its only task was to be for ever on guard.

Those things, then, both Captain Hunt and Superintendent Devine knew, but Devine, in particular, realised that there was a great deal of which he was utterly unaware, and although nothing of it showed, he held this man in awe.

Now, Palfrey dismissed the Intelligence Officer from his mind and smiled his rather vague smile at Devine; he gave the impression that although he was talking to the policeman he was thinking of something else.

"How did things go at the railway station?" he inquired.

"The woman collapsed," Devine reported.

"We'd hardly expect anything else. Is she at the nursing home?"

"Yes—as we arranged."

"We won't worry her tonight," Palfrey decided, "and my 'nurse' is there." By 'nurse' of course he meant agent; from the beginning Devine had been surprised at his thoroughness, at the deadly seriousness with which he had taken this disaster. "Costain?" Palfrey inquired.

"I tried to do what you wanted," Devine replied, and 'tried' was somewhat characteristic of the man. "He appeared to be very interested in Mrs. Drummond, and when he'd had time for everything to sink in, he seemed very—he *was* very distressed."

"Take those two statements a bit further, will you," Palfrey asked.

"They spent a day in London, possibly together, certainly going up and coming down on the same train," said Devine. "It's possible that they are having an *affaire* but nothing I've heard or found out suggests it. They are practically strangers—very few people know anything at all about Costain. He took umbrage when I hinted at an *affaire* but didn't lose his temper. It was the other thing that bothered me, the way it suddenly seemed to hit him so that he actually cried."

After a long pause, Palfrey said: "I see. Go on a bit more, will you?"

"Well, if he did go off for the day knowing what would happen it would automatically prove his involvement. But I'm a long way from convinced. My money would 30 on Professor Storr and his team, or his household, whatever you like to call it."

"Yes," said Palfrey. "You could well be right. I'm not oblivious of Storr," he added in a tone of reassurance. "But I'd like to see Costain first. And while I'm talking to him, leave us undisturbed unless a messenger arrives from London with a letter for me. The letter could be relevant. Oh—and coffee and sandwiches, I think. Costain may be hungrier than he realises and I, personally, am famished. Or how about some cheese and beer?"

"I'll fix everything," promised Devine, and as he finished speaking his telephone bell rang. "Excuse me … Yes … oh, is he. Tell him it's only a matter of minutes." He rang off, and went on drily: "Costain's getting impatient."

"I can't say I blame him," Palfrey said. "He should be in just about the right mood by now. If I'd come slowly to realise the consequence of the destruction of a whole village, I'd be impatient to know more about it, wouldn't you?"

Chapter Four

The Interview

As Palfrey stepped into the room, Costain turned from the window. He liked what he saw. The thin face with the high cheekbones, the weather-bronzed skin which made grey eyes seem very bright, the steady gaze, the hooked nose and bow-shaped lips.

Costain's faint frown became more one of puzzlement than of annoyance under the scrutiny.

"Mr. Costain," Palfrey said, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. It was unavoidable, I'm afraid, but that made it no easier for you." He put out his hand. "My name is Palfrey."

As they gripped, Costain breathed as if in echo; "Palfrey."

"Yes."

"Of—Z5?"

"Yes," Palfrey said, smiling. "I was once told that Z5 was the best known secret service in the world!"

Palfrey was quite serious when he said that the organisation he led was the 'best-known secret service in the world'. That was because in a number of acute world crises, where great nations had been held to ransom by megalomaniacs who held temporary but overwhelming power, Z5 had prevented disaster, and so had justified itself in the eyes not only of governments but of peoples. The task of Z5, and so Palfrey's task, was to seek out evil men who in this age of nuclear power and chemical warfare research could hold a world to ransom.

The headquarters of Z5 was in London; there were other major offices in Moscow and in Washington. Its agents numbered tens of thousands, mostly men and women working for some other cause, or for industry and commerce; or in the professions. These agents had one common loyalty: to Z5. Here in England Palfrey's first loyalty was to his organisation, and through it the world. Only after these were served could his beloved England call on his services.

Time and time again he risked his life in the cause of world security. So did many of his full-time agents; for that matter, many who served through their work and their vocations.

Some of these things were known to many; no one but Palfrey knew them all.

After Palfrey's mild jest, about Z5 being the best known secret service, there was a pause and a very slight but quite unmistakable change in his manner. "I'm sure you don't need telling how seriously today's disaster is being taken," he said to Costain.

"No," replied Costain. "I certainly don't."

"Nor why there were obvious reasons for wondering why a man who seldom leaves the countryside for London should choose this particular day," went on Palfrey.

"You mean—" Costain broke off. "Oh, I see. I could have gone knowing it would happen. I didn't, of course."

"Will you tell me why you did go today? It will be in confidence, of course."

"Dr. Palfrey," said Costain with a faint note of exasperation, "I did not go for an assignation with Mrs. Drummond, and at any other time I would resent the slur on her reputation. But I suppose there isn't much point in resentment, as things are. You know, I can still hardly believe in the disaster which has taken place." He broke off again, his expression one of extreme shock and horror. Palfrey was vividly aware of what Devine had meant, as Costain's eyes half-closed as if some pain made it difficult to open them. He went on: "I am—desperately sorry for Mrs. Drummond and I wish I could help her. The pity of it is that I don't think I can, any more than friends—or strangers for that matter—could help me, ten years ago." He had his eyes open wide now and looked at Palfrey with almost forbidding straightness. "Perhaps the best thing is to let you read a press cutting I have had in my pocket for ten years but a day."

He took out his wallet and from the back section took out a plastic protected cutting. It was not a big one, and was from the *Daily Telegraph.* It read:

Mother and three children buried in same grave.

The article explained the simple facts of what had happened and it carried a picture of a dark-haired woman, and narrow cut pictures of three children.

Palfrey read swiftly, then handed the cutting back.

"Did you go to the cemetery today?" he asked.

"Yes. As I have on every anniversary for the past ten years. The strange thing is that I told Mrs. Drummond about it, on the journey. I've never told anyone before. And I told her I didn't expect to go again. Less than half an hour afterwards she was brutally confronted with the fact that in all but detail, the same thing had happened to her."

Costain turned to the window, and silence fell. It was a welcome relief when there was a tap at the door and coffee and sandwiches, beer and cheese were brought in by an elderly messenger.

"When we've had a snack, I'd like you to come out to the village—or as near as we can safely get," Palfrey said at last. "You know the countryside well, and we won't need a guide." He proffered the sandwiches in a matter-of-fact way. "It will be a relief not to be followed by a police car and therefore by the Press. You can guess what a Roman holiday they're making of this, can't you? Television and movie teams have been down and may still be at the village. That's one reason we whisked Mrs. Drummond away." He began to eat, opened two bottles of beer, and after one sandwich, tried the

cheese. “Um-um. Very good. Try some.”

Costain found himself eating.

Half an hour later they left the police station by a side entrance, and as Palfrey was about to start the engine of a small, unmarked car, Devine came hurrying, with a letter in his hand.

“This has just arrived, sir.”

“Ah. Thanks. I’ll read it later.” Palfrey slipped the letter into his inside breast pocket, and started the engine. “I’d like to go high enough for us to look down on the village,” he said. “There’s hardly been a breath of air all day.”

“Then take the Romsey road,” Costain said. “Sane is on the fringe of the New Forest.”

“So I gather.”

Costain pointed out three turnings, and suddenly Palfrey pulled into the side of the road, and said: “It would be much wiser for you to drive. Get us there more quickly.” He got out, Costain manoeuvred himself into the driving seat, and started off, glad to have something to do. Since he had met Palfrey, his whole attitude had changed. Without minimising what had happened, Palfrey somehow took out the sting. “I’ll look through that letter,” he added, drawing it out of its envelope. One sideways glance told Costain that it was a two-paged, typewritten document. At last, when they were well in the country, he folded and put the letter away.

“How far now?” he asked.

“About seven miles.”

“Remarkably isolated, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Costain. “It took some finding.”

“You mean, a place to bury yourself in.”

“Bury is the word,” agreed Costain wryly.

“My dear chap! You will never get anywhere while you are as sensitive as that,” Palfrey remonstrated mildly. “Why is the village so isolated, do you know?”

“It was in one family’s hands, a family named Sane. The Manor House and every cottage and house, every farm and every barn was owned by them.” Costain answered.

“Ah, yes. Some of the industrial barons liked to buy their seclusion.”

“How did you know the original Lord Sane was an industrial baron?” asked Costain, and then almost laughed. “Damn silly question—Z5 finds out everything it doesn’t know.”

“It tries,” agreed Palfrey. “It has to. Sane was one of the first millionaires of the industrial revolution—coal, railways, bricks, ships, he had a finger in most pies and pulled money out of each.”

“He made a thoroughly good job of everything he did,” Costain retorted. “Did you know that every building in Sane is an architectural gem? The Manor House—” he broke off, then added in a strangled voice: “What will happen to it now? What *can* happen to it? Was—was anything damaged, do you know?”

“The first reports say no,” answered Palfrey. “They sent a platoon of men from Fulton, all trained to operate under exceptional conditions. Masked, of course, and wearing protective clothing. They found only the bodies.”

Costain flinched, and almost lost control of the wheel.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“And they brought back samples of the toxic air,” Palfrey went on. “It’s been tested a dozen ways and proved to be concentrated carbon monoxide, with sulphur dioxide. There’s another word for it, you know.” He paused but Costain said nothing. “Smog,” Palfrey stated, with great precision.

“Smog. The same as—” Costain boggled.

“The same as the exhaust from cars,” Palfrey finished for him. “Yes.” After a long pause he went on: “Know anything about smog?”

“I know as much about it as any ship’s engineer would,” Costain said. “I’ve been on steam and diesel driven ships. But I’ve never studied smog, as such.”

“Interesting,” Palfrey said. “You’ve background knowledge, anyhow.” After a pause he changed the subject. “How far are we away from the viewpoint?”

“Not much more than half a mile,” Costain answered. They were already on high ground, and he glanced over the surrounding countryside – wooded on the right, hilly farmland to the west. The evening had the same almost miraculous clarity as the morning. Now, approaching a sweeping curve in the road which would bring them to the viewpoint, he felt a wave of nausea, hating the thought of going on. He was just aware of Palfrey looking at him, and clenched his teeth.

“I’ll pull in to the right,” he said.

“Wherever you think.”

“The village is two miles away, westward. Just look to the right.”

“Very well.”

Costain touched the brakes gently to slow down for the familiar curve. Even the electric milk float took this with ease. The land seemed to fall away on the right, they could see over a vast area of hilly, wooded land and patches of open heathland.

In between these was a valley.

Over the valley there was something which Costain had never seen before: a yellowish grey pall of smoke. Instead of the houses in the village, the inn, the post office-cum-shop, the narrow streets, the gay flowered gardens, the small, trim lawns and clipped hedges, the fruit trees soon to bear, the soft fruit already yielding, there was the yellow blanket, thick, impenetrable to the naked eye.

And beyond the yellow pall, almost as if it were floating on the fog itself, stood Sane Manor. Everything about it was still. No people and no animals moved, and there was no wind to stir the trees. It was almost as much a part of the desolation as that thick, unmoving blanket which covered so many dead.

Costain sat staring, hardly aware that he had stopped and put the car

automatically into neutral. But he hadn't turned off the engine. Palfrey leaned across and did it for him.

Costain moistened his lips.

"And—they're all there?"

"Two were taken out."

"But—but why leave the others?"

"They are all dead," Palfrey stated.

"But—" Costain began, only to break off. He was grey-white, and there was hardly any colour in his lips. "Have you any idea what—" he gulped, and simply could not go on.

"No. It almost certainly has nothing to do with Fulton."

"But surely—" Costain stopped.

"Either an accident," Palfrey said. "Or deliberate."

"I can't understand—either."

"If an accident, there was an escape of the gas from substantial quantities stored nearby," Palfrey said in that matter-of-fact way. Costain was beginning to expect. "If deliberate, one must presume it was a kind of experiment."

"It—it's unthinkable," Costain muttered.

"It's even more unthinkable that we shouldn't soon find out the reason," Palfrey retorted. "How well did you know the villagers?"

"In one way, very well. That is, I saw most of them every day. Yet—" again Costain broke off, the shock seemed to have affected him so that he was unable to finish a sentence coherently. "I can't imagine anyone who could be responsible."

"Among the villagers?" Palfrey asked.

"That's what I mean."

"It's remarkable that the Manor is absolutely untouched," remarked Palfrey, almost too casually.

"I was just thinking about that. Wasn't Storr or anyone of them hurt?"

"No. But they raised the alarm," Palfrey said.

"Oh."

"They're in Winchester, now," Palfrey volunteered. "They moved of their own choice because of the danger that the smog level would rise. A few wisps of smog certainly reached the house, but hardly enough to notice—not half as much as you would find in any big city street where there's been a lot of traffic, and running engines during traffic hold-ups. Do you know Professor Storr?"

"I've met him, as the milkman," Costain muttered.

"The others?"

"Only to say good morning or good evening. I—" Costain had a sudden recollection of those moments when he had watched Marion Kemble at the window. "I—would have liked to have known them better, but even if I'd been willing I doubt if they would have been."

"Kept themselves to themselves, did they?"

"Very much so," Costain confirmed. "Palfrey—" again he broke off.

"Yes?"

"Are you implying that they might know something about what happened?"

"I don't think I was implying it, but it would be an odd man who didn't wonder," Palfrey replied drily. "Costain, stop looking down there and look at me, will you?"

Slowly, as if the yellow pall exerted a mesmeric effect on him, Costain obeyed. He sensed his own pallor, and his lips and mouth were dry. It was as if he could see the filthy stuff rising, gradually creeping up the sides of the valley; covering and smothering all living creatures; as if he could see the men and women and children gasping, clutching at their throats, could see them collapsing. These were things he saw reflected in Palfrey's clear eyes, until the visions vanished and he saw only Palfrey. There was nothing at all to suggest weakness or vagueness in Palfrey now.

"In the letter I read earlier was a report on you," stated Palfrey. "It covered your movements today, it covered your life up to the time of your family's deaths. It covered your navy and merchant navy career as an engineer. I am quite satisfied that you can help to discover the truth about what happened down there. It will be extremely dangerous. It will take all your time and demand absolute dedication. By sheer chance you are the only man who is likely to be able to help, because you are the only man acquainted with the Professor and his household who has a rational and understandable common interest and also has background knowledge of the way smog is made."

When Palfrey stopped, everything, every hurt, seemed to be drawn out of David Costain by the sudden realisation that he could help; that at long, long last he could have a reason for living.

He felt an almost ungovernable impulse to say yes, immediately; but the habit of years and an instinctive caution in him made him pause; and inevitably out of the hesitation came the question: "How long may I have to think about it?"

"Not much more than twelve hours," Palfrey answered, promptly – as if the question had long been anticipated. "It would be highly improbable, almost indicative of suspicion of them, if you didn't see Storr, the Kemble women and the other two men tomorrow morning. And it's nine o'clock now."

Costain looked away from him down into the valley which concealed that village of death.

"Can we talk again at nine in the morning?" he asked.

"We'll meet and talk over breakfast," Palfrey declared, and again Costain had the impression that he had anticipated and answered that question long ago. "Be advised by me on one thing, will you? Take one of these pills." He shook a tablet from a small phial onto his hand, and held it out. "One of these before you go to bed and you'll sleep like a top but have no hangover. You need sleep," he added grimly. "While you can get it."

Chapter Five

The Answer

Costain slept with the deepness of exhaustion, without stirring, without opening his eyes and beginning to think and brood, as once he had done so often. He woke a little after eight o'clock, with a slight headache, turned – and saw a tea tray, the water in the jug still steaming. He struggled up, poured out, sipped and looked about him. This room, which he had hardly noticed the night before, was small, pleasantly furnished, with flowered chintz at the windows and a matching bedspread. His clothes were folded neatly on a stand. If he had done that, it had been from reflex action.

Slowly, he began to think of what he had seen or heard, but the main impact was over. He had a heavy feeling of depression, that was all. He went into an adjoining bathroom and found a safety razor, new blades, soap and a brush; now he was sure that someone had been in here while he had slept.

He was ready by ten minutes to nine, and while he wondered whether to wait for Palfrey or go downstairs, the bedside telephone rang. It was almost uncanny.

"Costain," he announced.

"How nearly ready are you?" asked Palfrey.

"Already dressed, and more or less in my right mind."

"Good man. Down the stairs, the room on your left at the foot. I may be delayed a few minutes."

"That's all right." Costain put down the receiver, glanced at himself in the mirror and adjusted his tie, shrugged his jacket into position, and went out. A radio played, not far away, and a woman laughed. So he wasn't the only inmate. Inmate? He went down narrow carpeted stairs, already judging this to be a fairly modern house. The door of the room at the foot of the stairs was open and he went in, to find a breakfast table set for two, a hotplate on a polished mahogany sideboard, coffee bubbling in a percolator. At one place, back to the window which overlooked a lawn and flower beds radiant in summer colours, were several morning newspapers, folded, placed so that the front page headlines of each were visible. He stood staring down:

MYSTERY GAS WIPES OUT VILLAGE, said *The Times.*
HORROR IN HAMPSHIRE, said the *Telegraph.*
VILLAGE WIPED OUT BY GAS, stated the *Express.*
98 DEAD IN VILLAGE TRAGEDY, said the *Mail.*
MYSTERY OF VILLAGE OF THE DEAD, said the *Guardian.*
ENGLISH VILLAGE WIPED OUT, the *Sketch* announced.
PLAGUE? suggested the *Mirror,* starkly.

Costain read only a few lines at the beginning of each article. Only the

Mirror, using the whole of its front page, made an out and out accusation against the activities at Fulton.

> "We have known for years that death by microbe and poison gases with hideous lethal effect has long been the subject of experiment at Fulton. Now one of England's most beautiful villages, within a few miles of these laboratories of death, has been wiped out. It is useless for the government to talk of coincidence. We must take no risks with Britain or the British people. The Fulton plague spot, not the beauty of Britain, must be wiped out."

He put the newspaper down, and heard the front door open at the same time. A moment later, Palfrey stepped in.

He was dressed exactly as he had been the night before, but now his jacket and trousers were rumpled, as if he had slept in them. He was fresh-shaven, however, and his manner was brisk and alert.

"Coffee?" he asked, and pressed a bell as he picked up the percolator. "And they'll bring in breakfast. Sleep well?"

"Very."

"Good. Made up your mind?" Palfrey held out a cup of coffee in a strong and steady hand.

"One question," Costain said, taking the cup.

"Yes."

"Why did you say that I am the only one who might be able to insinuate myself into the Manor household?"

"Who else can?" asked Palfrey, and then he raised his hand. A young girl brought in a laden tray on which were eggs, sausages, bacon, toast, butter and marmalade. These she distributed neatly on the table and withdrew.

"Grace Drummond," Costain suggested.

"What makes you think that in her present state of shock she would be the slightest use?" asked Palfrey. "If she came round from sedation in time to try, do you think I could possibly put this to her, or that she would understand or even be able to think clearly about it? If she had the faintest idea that Professor Storr was responsible for the death of her family, do you think she could hide it for one moment?"

As he spoke, he helped himself liberally from one of the dishes.

"Do help yourself," he urged.

"All right," Costain said, "it was a thoughtless question—there was no sense in it. Do you still want me to help?" He took an egg and some bacon, then turned back for a piece of dry toast.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked Palfrey.

"For one thing, my reasoning powers aren't very impressive, are they?"

Palfrey smiled, very faintly.

"In this instance, no," he admitted. "And while it would help if they were always impressive, they aren't essential. Your job is to observe even the

most trifling detail, and report. You will be given precise instructions how to get in touch, of course. You should at no time ask questions unless they arise naturally out of a conversation, nor are you to look for anything at all unless on specific instructions from Z5. But I'll give you a comprehensive list of instructions once we know you are willing to help."

"What would stop me, now?" asked Costain.

"If the Professor decided to move away from The Manor," answered Palfrey. "If he does, it would be a natural enough thing to do—natural if he decided to close the house up, for instance. If he stays then it will suggest he has a very good reason for being there."

"Yes," agreed Costain, somewhat glumly. He did not say so, but the prospect of being able to help materially seemed to have receded very much in the past few minutes. "Have you seen Mrs. Drummond this morning?" he asked, annoyed with himself because he had taken so long to think of her.

"She is still under heavy sedation," Palfrey answered. "If there proves to be any way you can help her, I won't lose any time letting you know."

"Thanks." Costain knew that he had to be satisfied with that. He had lost his appetite, but Palfrey ate steadily, more as an obligation than with enjoyment. "I see the *Mirror* blames Fulton, and the other newspapers hint at it being an escape of gas from some research unit there."

"It will be interesting to see whom the Professor blames," said Palfrey drily. "He has returned, temporarily I think, to the Manor. We have an appointment with him there at half-past ten." Then anticipating the obvious question, he went on: "I asked to see all those who might be called survivors together, so that I can question you all at the same time. It will give you an added common interest. I told them I would pick you up at your hotel."

"So you're not attempting to conceal your interest in Storr," remarked Costain.

"Only an idiot would try to," retorted Palfrey. "When we meet, just be as much yourself as you can, there's no need to take any lead from me. You were annoyed by Devine last night, weren't you?"

"I certainly was."

"No reason why you shouldn't say so," Palfrey told him. "Make it seem as if you and I only met this morning. Just play it by ear."

After a long pause, Costain pushed his chair back abruptly.

"If you don't mind my saying so, this seems to me a lot too serious to be played by ear."

"My dear chap," Palfrey remonstrated mildly. "There's absolutely no other way for you to do it. Either you can or you can't. If you can, you may help us to work miracles. If you can't, then you won't be any use at all. The sooner we find out, the better, don't you think?"

Costain nodded. He was nettled, although he had to agree with the simple common sense of Palfrey's argument. Now he seemed to carry an added burden: at all costs he had to prove himself, for if he failed Palfrey he would be a man lost in the wilderness.

At ten past ten, they set out.

At twenty-five past, they stopped at the spot where the village could be seen, and as he looked down Costain saw the tops of some of the houses, the church tower, an ancient tree in the churchyard. On the roads leading into the village there were barricades; policemen and military were in charge. And ambulances were lined up, at least five of them.

"So they're taking the bodies away," Costain said, and he felt sick again. "What will there be—a mass burial?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Palfrey said. "It will depend on the relatives. How does it affect you this morning?"

Costain drew a deep breath before saying slowly: "If I can help to find who is responsible, it will make the past ten years seem worthwhile." He looked down at the village, and then espied a large car approaching from a main road, and being stopped by one of the barricades.

"That's Storr's Rolls Royce," he said. "We won't be long getting started, anyway."

As they drove towards the house, Costain found himself staring at the window where Marion Kemble had stood the morning before, yesterday – God! *Yesterday* morning. It seemed an age, a generation ago. The window was closed now; every window was. There was a stronger than usual smell of exhaust fumes, particularly noticeable when they got out, in front of the porch. As they stepped to the door, it was opened by an elderly man, whose age was probably nearer seventy than sixty. His hair was almost white, his lean, lined face set in worried lines. Costain knew him as Arthur Harrison but knew little about him.

"Mr. Harrison," Palfrey said.

"Come in," said Harrison. "The Professor won't keep you many moments. We have only just arrived ourselves. Mr. Costain." He bowed slightly, pleasant and affable in manner and speech. "Please come into the study."

Costain had never been inside before, and was pleasantly surprised by the spaciousness and grace of the hall, at one end of which ran a half circular staircase, carpeted – like the hall – in pale grey. There was no time for him to do more than take in the pictures, landscapes and portraits, before Harrison led them into a room on the left which overlooked the front grounds. It was high ceilinged, with bookshelves in each of the wide recesses on either side of a huge fireplace. There was a large, flat-topped desk, and four leather armchairs placed around it. The room, which had a richly figured carpet, had a curiously unlived-in appearance.

"Do sit down," said Harrison. "I will tell the Professor you are waiting."

"Mr. Harrison," said Palfrey.

"Yes?"

"What is your position here?" inquired Palfrey.

"I am Professor Storr's confidential *aide*" answered Harrison, with cold politeness. "If you wish for further details I am sure you understand that I would have to consult the Professor before giving them."

"Mr. Harrison," Palfrey said gravely, "I am not at all sure you understand

the seriousness of what has happened. In the face of this disaster, nothing is confidential."

Harrison said, more coldly still: "Indeed, sir?" Without another word, he went out.

Costain was startled to see the way Palfrey's stern expression gave way to a smile as the man disappeared. "Not much change there," he remarked. "I wonder how long he has worked for the Professor."

On the instant, Professor Storr appeared, and Costain's first, almost bewildered reaction was surprise at the handsomeness, even the regality of his appearance. He was smiling, too, with a touch of the urbanity which was so characteristic of Palfrey.

"For over twenty years," he declared, "and I assure you nothing is ever going to make him disloyal. If he had reason to believe I was directly responsible for what happened yesterday, I am sure he would never tell you."

Storr looked at Palfrey almost challengingly, yet with some hint of amusement.

"And *were* you responsible?" Palfrey asked with a bluntness which astonished Costain and made Professor Storr go still as a statue.

Chapter Six

Storr

As the two men stood in open challenge, Costain was aware of movements out of the corner of his eye, and in spite of the tension, glanced round. Harrison was now behind a wheel chair in which sat the youngest member of the household, Philip Montefiore. By him were Marion and Griselda Kemble. Griselda taller, lean-faced, almost hawklike, Marion a little thickset, full-bosomed – as he so well knew – with lively blue eyes in a pleasant but not particularly beautiful face. Griselda was much the more striking. They were staring at Palfrey, and Costain turned away and then was struck suddenly by the expression on the young man's face.

He was looking at Palfrey, his glance one of unabashed hatred.

Slowly, the tension relaxed, and Storr said quietly: "If I weren't aware of the strain you are working under, I would resent that question very much. No—I was not even remotely responsible for what happened here."

"That bloody plague spot at Fulton—" the young man began, his voice showing that he was as English as the Kembles.

"We can talk about that later, Philip," Storr interrupted, and turned to Costain, who had a distinct impression that Palfrey deliberately allowed him to take over. "Good morning, Mr. Costain. I don't think we've met except casually. Do you know my nephew, Philip Montefiore? and my secretaries, Marion and Griselda Kemble?" There were nods and half-smiles all round – except that Marion's smile was wider, her expression the most amiable. "Mr. Harrison I believe you do know."

"We've met," Costain said.

"Nothing like enough, I'm afraid," Storr replied. "We have been very busy and preoccupied here but we should really have taken some part in the social life of the village. By ironic chance, only last weekend we were discussing the possibility of an 'at home'." His manner was as relaxed and easy as it could be. "After this disaster—" He spread his hands. "What will you do, Mr. Costain?"

"I haven't thought seriously about it," Costain answered. "I suppose it will depend on whether my cottage is—can be decontaminated." He glanced at Palfrey. "And whether the village ever revives."

"It can't. It can't possibly. It's been murdered." Philip's voice became shrill, almost strident. "Instead of pestering us, you ought to be in Whitehall, making sure those murderous warmongers—"

"Philip, please," remonstrated Storr.

"I've kept quiet a damned sight too long. It's bad enough this terrible thing should happen, but to have Palfrey come and insult you—why, there isn't a man in Whitehall fit to clean your shoes! Go back, Palfrey, and have the plague spot destroyed. Decontaminated—that was certainly the word." Now he switched his gaze to Costain, his eyes burning, his lips barely

opening as he spoke. “The whole area—the whole bloody country wants decontaminating.”

“Philip, I don’t think these are the right circumstances for your anti-war diatribe,” said Storr. “Dr. Palfrey, you asked for this meeting and I will be glad to help in any way possible but I haven’t too much time.”

“Ah,” said Palfrey, almost inaudibly. He was twisting a few strands of hair round his forefinger, and looked deeply preoccupied. “None of us has and we mustn’t waste any.” He patted the strands absently back into place as he went on: “Except for Mrs. Drummond, who is prostrate, you six are the only survivors of the disaster likely to be of use to us in our inquiries. The others were too far away. I explained last night that the British Government has asked me to investigate—”

“Why don’t you tell them to close Fulton?” Philip interrupted in the same savage way. “Instead of pestering us, why don’t you—”

Palfrey cut across his words with a sharpness which Costain had not heard before.

“Mr. Montefiore, I chose to see you all together here at your home instead of singly, at the police station. But it was on the assumption that I would be discussing the matter with adults.”

Philip opened his mouth wide – then closed it again. Storr turned away with a faint smile on his lips.

“What I would like is to ask a number of questions while we are all together,” Palfrey went on to a more attentively respectful audience. “Then I would like a few minutes with each of you alone. The point of the general questioning is very simple; one of you may say something which will spark some kind of recollection in one or other of the others.” He gave a brief pause, and then asked: “Would you care to sit down?”

Storr and Harrison pulled up chairs, Costain found himself sitting next to Marion, with Griselda on his other side. Storr sat opposite Palfrey flanked by Philip, whose resentment showed thunderously in his expression.

“Has any of you seen any yellow mist in the village at any time?” asked Palfrey.

“I don’t recall any,” Storr replied.

“There’s the usual autumn mist, and sometimes early mist in the summer,” remarked Marion.

“You should know,” Griselda said, and went on: “My sister is a great believer in early morning breathing exercises in front of an open window, rain or fine, hot or cold.”

“Mist has been fairly thick, sometimes,” Marion told them. “But—yellow? No, I don’t remember—” She leaned back in her chair, eyes half-closed, as if trying to remember. “It has sometimes appeared very thick—grey and opaque, Dr. Palfrey. I am not an inveterate early riser, but on nights when I sleep badly I often get up about dawn.”

“My room doesn’t overlook the village,” said Storr. “Yours does, Philip.”

“*I’ve* never noticed anything either yellow or brown.” Philip’s voice was sulky.

"Mr. Costain," Palfrey said. "You're up early every morning, aren't you?"

"I think—" began Costain.

"You know, it *has* been yellow once or twice," Marion interrupted. "Not thick, nothing like it was yesterday, but yellowish."

"I was going to say there has been a yellow tinge on some mornings," Costain said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Palfrey. "Can you say what morning?"

"I remember one day in the winter, just after the first snow, when there were some slippery patches and Joe Taylor had a spill on his motorcycle. He was going too fast, and—"

He stopped abruptly, for Joe Taylor and his son were both dead; both had died yesterday, in their barn, just inside the contaminated area.

"I remember that morning," Marion put in, quietly. "It *was* more yellow."

"Did you notice any smell?"

She didn't answer at first, but Costain put in with a slow excitement: "There was a smell of carbon monoxide!"

"*Imagination,*" muttered Philip.

"The motorcycle ended up in the hedge but its engine didn't stop," went on Costain. "I remember distinctly. I saw the accident from the top of the hill."

"I heard the engine," Marion put in. "I couldn't understand what it was, but Taylor told me afterwards. I could smell the exhaust, too."

"You—from half-way up the hill?" Griselda was sceptical.

"From half-way up the hill—but it didn't really surprise me," Marion went on. She had a pleasant voice but it held none of the almost histrionic resonance of her sister's. "With the wind blowing from the village we often get—"

"Farm odours," supplied Costain drily.

"Well, we *do.*"

"Yes, I know. I will have to find a—" he stopped. It was obvious that everyone of them had the same thought as he: there would never be a chance to experiment, there wasn't a single animal left alive. He moistened his lips.

"I have known the perfume of the blossom from the apple orchard to be very strong, especially in the evenings," put in Storr, gently. "And that is nearly half a mile away. It does depend entirely on the direction of the wind."

"You know," said Marion, slowly, "there *was* a yellowish morning in the village a few weeks ago. I remember it vividly now. The wind had cut in during the night and I was closing the window. The exhaust fumes almost knocked me back."

"Missed your daily dozen?" asked Griselda sceptically.

"No, I went in the Professor's room—he was in London that week."

"My room is across the landing, and faces south," explained Storr, again.

"Was there any smell from the south?" asked Palfrey.

"No. *No!*" cried Marion, almost excited in her effort to recall everything

that had happened. “No smell, but *that* was when I heard the engine popping. And the motorcycle was north from the Manor, and the wind was coming from the opposite direction, so the smell *I* noticed wasn’t coming from motorcycle exhaust. Do you know I hadn’t realised that before.”

She looked triumphantly into Palfrey’s eyes.

“Thank you very much indeed,” said Palfrey. “The smell of the carbon monoxide was coming from the village, then.”

“From between the front of the Manor and the village,” interjected Storr, drily.

“Look here, I’m not being bloody-minded for the sake of it,” put in Philip. “And I can see how one recollection does spark off another, but the smell that Marion noticed might *not* have been carbon monoxide—”

“Carbon monoxide has no smell,” Harrison remarked. It was the first time he had spoken. “Hydrocarbons and oxides of nitrogen combine to make the smell.”

“Well I’m damned!” Philip exclaimed. “You’re right. Damn it, Dr. Palfrey, you ought to know something as elementary as that!”

For a moment, Costain thought that the youth might have angered Palfrey, and Storr looked concerned, while Marion actually began to say: “Hush, Philip.”

All Palfrey did was to smile and say: “I should indeed. But the object of this exercise is to find out what all of you know, Mr. Montefiore. I’ve been in this job for a long time,” he went on, almost self-deprecatingly, “and I’m always fascinated by how much the human memory retains without realising it. And it often needs only the slightest jog to bring a recollection. Here we have a fairly detailed story of what happened one winter morning which most of you had virtually forgotten.”

“It was Friday, February 3rd,” announced Costain suddenly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes—” Marion was eager to confirm it. “It was the day before Philip was due back from hospital. I went to London that afternoon and we drove back next day.”

“I didn’t think you’d make it, the roads were so bad,” Philip said in a natural, almost eager way. “I remember you telling me about Joe Taylor.”

“Did you know him?” asked Palfrey.

“I had some trouble with my electrically driven chair,” Philip said, “and he came and helped me put it right.”

“Why did you remember the date?” Palfrey asked Costain.

“It was the day my milking machine broke down and I was afraid I’d be without it for the weekend. I remember now—” Costain paused and everyone watched him intently. “I was surprised there was so much smell in the village when I got back—that would be about eleven o’clock in the morning. But it was quite clear at the cottage.”

“Are you sure?” Palfrey asked sharply.

“Absolutely sure. I went sniffing round my place because I use Calor gas and if there’s a leak, it could be dangerous.”

“So what we have established is that the mist had a yellow tinge that morning over the village,” said Professor Storr very quietly. “That there were two sources of a stench, like the exhaust fumes of a car or motorcycle, and one was between the entrance to the Manor and the south end of the village. There is an obvious place where it could have come from.”

Everyone now stared at him.

“Where?” asked Palfrey.

“Geoffrey Drummond’s house,” said the Professor deliberately. “Drummond never trusts—” he broke off, then added smoothly: “Drummond never trusted the electricity supply here. We are fed off a small transformer which does let us down from time to time. So he had a small petrol-fired generator, and made his own supplies. I’ve passed the back of his house occasionally and noticed the exhaust fumes.”

“Have you searched there?” Philip asked, his voice sharp again.

“No,” Palfrey answered, “but everywhere will be searched. Which leads me to a very relevant question, Professor. Are you planning to stay here or will you move for the time being at least?”

“I hope to stay,” Storr answered, with hesitation. “Certainly until I am convinced that there is acute danger of a repetition of what has happened. Why do you wish to know?”

“Because I want to have the Manor and the ground searched thoroughly,” Palfrey replied. “Had you been planning to move, then I would have waited. As it is, the quicker the better.” He was twisting strands of hair about his forefinger again, and watching Storr. But it was from Philip that the outburst came, he was right back in his savage mood.

“Of all the bloody nerve! You’re telling us you suspect us at the Manor. Why, before I’d let anyone search—”

“Don’t be absurd,” Professor Storr interrupted sharply. “Of course we are under suspicion and of course the authorities must search. The sooner it is done and Dr. Palfrey is reassured, the better it will be for all of us. How long will you need, Palfrey? Do you know?”

“I should imagine at least a day,” Palfrey estimated.

“How soon can you start?”

“Within an hour,” answered Palfrey. “We should be able to finish inside the house, if not in the grounds, before dark. There is a platoon of Special Service engineers in the village, I can send for them right away.”

“Then please do that,” Storr said. “If there is any assistance any of us can give you please let me know.”

“And then get out of our hair,” growled Philip. There was a long pause, while Palfrey stared at the young man, and then said coldly: “Mr. Montefiore you don’t seem to be aware that you are doing more than anyone or anything else to draw suspicion on this house.”

Philip glowered, but made no retort. Palfrey turned towards the door and Costain and Storr followed him. Storr went ahead and opened the door, and Palfrey stepped outside.

He stood absolutely still, staring down.

The tops of the houses and the church tower had disappeared again, hidden by a thick yellow pall. Worse, far worse, a pale yellowish smoke seemed to be rising out of dozens, hundreds, of cracks and crevices in the drive and in the grassy banks which lined the drive, so that even the gates of the Manor were invisible.

Chapter Seven

The Discovery

"Oh, my goodness," Marion exclaimed from just behind the men. "Look!"

"Now we'll have to get out," Griselda said, with a break in her voice. "Stephen, you can't insist on staying."

"Everyone out the back way, at once," Palfrey ordered. "Costain, will you drive my car to the back? Professor, will you—"

He did not complete what he was going to say, for several masked men broke through the smog, dim figures at first, then more sharply defined. As they drew near, the first man pushed his mask to one side and called out: "Dr. Palfrey! We can't contain this—get everyone away at once."

"They've already started," Palfrey said. "Do you know where the stuff is coming from?"

"It seemed to start near the gates of the Manor," the man answered. "For God's sake—"

He broke off, kicking against a stone and pitching forward – and as he did so a wisp of the smog rose up from the spot where he had tripped. Then Costain, almost by the car, saw a little puff of smog near the car itself. The fumes bit into his throat and he started to cough.

Marion Kemble was just behind him, and wrenching the passenger door open he turned and pushed her roughly in, then ran round to the other side, and grabbed the wheel. The key was in the ignition. All about them, on higher ground as well as low, the puffs of smog were getting thicker and more frequent. Griselda sprang to the car and scrambled in the back as Costain started off.

He glanced towards the porch and saw that Palfrey was wearing a small mask, not much different from a hospital mask, but with goggles which fitted snugly. Other men with more conventional masks had emerged from the smog, but the most awful sight was the little spiral clouds of smog which rose everywhere until one joined with another to make a blanket of evil smelling fumes that crept slowly but remorselessly towards the Manor.

Palfrey raised an arm, waving the car away. Costain put on speed, relieved at seeing the gravel ahead and the grass on either side free from the clouds of vapour.

"I don't know whether that man's a fool or a genius," Griselda remarked.

"I don't know whether to hate him or admire him," said Marion. "Do you know him well, Mr. Costain?"

"Know Palfrey well?" asked Costain, startled. "I'd never met him until yesterday. I'd heard of him, of course."

"What do you think of him?" asked Griselda.

Costain took his time in answering, knowing that if he were ever to make the right impression with these two members of Storr's household, this was the great opportunity. He turned out of a side entrance onto the narrow road

which led sharply upwards, reached the top, saw the other car half a mile ahead, and a stretch of clear sky and lovely countryside, an unbelievable contrast with what lay behind them.

"On the whole," he answered at last, "I think he frightens me. Almost as much as the smog," he added with a sound that was half-laugh, half-growl.

"How does he frighten you?" inquired Marion.

"I think he's utterly ruthless and will let nothing get in his way," Costain answered.

"I know exactly what you mean," said Griselda, and the tone of her voice added a strange, almost prophetic warning to all that Costain had said.

Palfrey was not thinking of them.

His mask was effective enough for the time being but he knew that he would not have to stay in this atmosphere long. The clear goggles were darkened by the polluted air, and although he could see within a radius of a hundred yards, beyond that there was only the thick, slowly stirring smog. It carried him back to the days of his boyhood, to days of London's pea soupers, but there was something much worse about this, a sinister, uncanny element that struck terror to the heart.

And he knew how bright and fresh was the air beyond it.

Half a dozen men were moving about, all of them with what looked like mine detectors, and each stopped at one or other of the tiny cracks in the ground from which the smog seemed to come, and held the 'detector' over it. They were measuring the density and taking samples which would be analysed in the laboratories at Fulton. The irony of the fact that Fulton was so near was never far from his mind; nor was the possibility that, in spite of the assurances of the authorities there, this poisonous gas was a result of some unofficial experiment.

But why and how did it come out of the ground?

He walked through the gateway of the Manor and turned right, towards the village. He knew it fairly well, now, for he had spent much of the night here – and he did not think that he would ever be free from the effects of the macabre horror of this village of the dead.

How many bodies had been taken away by now?

The man who had come to warn the group in the Manor joined him, and pointed downwards. His meaning was obvious; there were no outlets of smog on the macadamised surface of the roadway, or on the paths. A red pillar box built into an old brick wall faced him on the right, with the familiar ER on it and the times of collections black on white enamel.

It had been the postman, who had come to clear the boxes in the village for the morning collection, who had given the warning about the smog.

Palfrey came to the Drummonds' house.

He wondered how Grace Drummond was, then that thought faded, for he saw two soldiers, grotesque in special protective suits, wearing masks which had built-in cylinders of oxygen. The door was open but beyond it was a thick canvas curtain. The man with Palfrey pushed this aside, and Palfrey

stepped into a small decontamination chamber where two men stood, each carrying a miniature spray gun. One sprayed Palfrey, one the officer. The men nodded, and now Palfrey led the way into the next room.

This was a pleasantly furnished living room.

The whole of the window had been blacked out with gas-resistant, processed hessian, and there was a square cover built over the fireplace. Otherwise, nothing appeared to have been altered. In an ashtray by the side of an armchair were several cigarette butts, while in between two chairs was a low table with whisky, a soda syphon and two glasses.

Both men removed their masks.

"You'd better have a regulation mask if you're going to be here long, sir." The officer, Lieutenant Hill, was probably half Palfrey's age, fresh-faced, clear-eyed, obviously public school.

"I shall indeed," said Palfrey. "How did this particular bother start?"

"Can't be absolutely sure, sir. I was in here when I received a report that the concentration was much greater than it had been, between this spot and the Manor. And I didn't lose any time coming to warn you."

"A good thing you didn't," said Palfrey. "What is the concentration like at the other end of the village?"

"Very much as before. Care to come straight into the operations room or would you like some coffee or anything?"

"I'll go straight in," Palfrey said.

The 'operations room' was across a narrow passage, and was in fact the dining room. Here was a long refectory table set with chairs which looked very much like genuine William and Mary. On one wall were two lighting brackets which had been adapted by the army to take a couple of powerful lamps. A non-commissioned officer, sitting under the harsh brilliance, scrambled to his feet as Palfrey and the officer entered.

The lieutenant picked up a small stick, rather like a conductor's baton, and pointed to an Ordnance Survey map fastened to one wall. All over this there were red marks, tiny crosses – sometimes two, three or even four close together.

"Where the bodies were found," he said.

Palfrey nodded. "What are the green smudges?"

"They denote the deeper concentration of the stuff," Hill said. "How many more reports since I left, sergeant?"

"Twenty-seven, sir—you see where the area has been dotted?" The man pointed with a long forefinger and Hill waved the stick. "Between the north end of the village and the Manor, sir."

The whole of this area had been dotted with green. It was narrow, close to the village, and gradually widened, until it looked like a mass of dots encircling the Manor.

"Well?" Hill asked.

"The reports are so numerous from that area, sir, that I dotted it—impossible to keep an accurate record."

"I see, yes."

"Meaning, exactly?" said Palfrey.

"That's the area we walked through," Hill said. "Any source discovered?"

"No, sir. But obviously it comes from underground."

"I like proof, not guesswork, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"What investigations are pending?"

"The blue areas indicate places where we are digging to find out if the source *is* underground, sir."

"And are there no reports in?"

"None, sir."

"Where is the nearest dig?" asked Palfrey.

"Fifty-two yards from this safety zone, sir."

"In the garden of this house, do you mean?"

"In a shed, to be exact, sir—a shed at the end of the garden."

"Is there a petrol-fired generator plant here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like you to get some alternative source of light, and have the generator dismantled with very great care," Palfrey said to Hill.

"I'll put some mechanics onto it straight away. Sergeant, see to it."

"Yes, sir." The man picked up a field telephone near his chair.

"And I'd like to go and see this dig," said Palfrey. "Can I have one of the regulation masks?"

"And a protective suit," Hill recommended.

"In the next room, sir," the corporal volunteered. "The kitchen."

Hill nodded, and led the way. As they reached the door, Palfrey paused and turned on his heel.

"Any further casualties reported?"

"Birds and animals only, sir—no human casualties. The whole area is cordoned off, of course, with an electrified wire fence."

"Yes. Any reports of anyone trying to get through?"

"No, sir."

"How many corpses have been removed?"

"Fifty-one, sir. The operation is still proceeding."

Palfrey nodded, and went out with Hill. One man was in charge of the masks and uniforms next door and in a mild way Palfrey marvelled at the efficiency with which the military had taken over. It was almost as if they had been in control here for weeks, not just a few hours. Masked and safely clad, he went out by the back door, and stood for a moment, studying the situation.

The land rose upwards in a gentle slope from the end of a patch of grass on which stood a child's steel framed swing, a see-saw, and one or two gaily painted toys. Beyond this was a vegetable garden in which everything was wilting; an orchard; and at the end of the orchard, a shed which, wider than an average garden shed, looked more like a large summer house or cabin. Beyond this in turn, masked men in the now familiar protective clothing were digging.

The uncanny thing was that they dug down into the rising blanket of smog, which rose thickly about their feet, thinning a little at waist height.

"Looks as if they've found one source," Hill muttered grimly.

Palfrey nodded as they went on to the shed, the door of which stood open. On the threshold they paused. Two men were standing inside a hole which was at least five feet deep, dug in the floor of the shed, and they were on either side of a big container, of the kind in which Calor or Butane gas was stored. One end of this disappeared into the earth; from the other, thin pipes rose to the surface, controlled by valves and stop cocks.

"So we've found *one* source," Lieutenant Hill said, and this time he could not keep the excitement out of his voice.

Palfrey nodded, as for the second time he saw a picture of Grace Drummond's face in his mind's eye.

Chapter Eight

Source

Palfrey stayed with the investigating team and watched the story unfold.

Yet more pipes leading from the big tank led hundreds of feet along the ground, surfacing through holes drilled in the ground. All the pipes led to the Manor House. There was no doubt that the means of distributing the carbon monoxide had been discovered. Sooner or later what had happened this morning would have happened; there was as yet no way of telling whether it was simply a case of accidental escape of the gas.

"I still don't see how it rises up through the topsoil," Hill had said.

"Worm holes and mole and rabbit holes, sir," volunteered a sergeant in the team. "You'd be surprised at just how many tunnelling animals and insects there are. The gas has been released through little valves in the pipes —" he pointed to marks in a plastic hose, rather like a garden watering hose – "and the pump we saw back at the shed created sufficient pressure. Once the gas was released it found its way through the crevices and holes and loose earth. Very simple, sir, really."

"Yes," said Palfrey. "But *why?* Any ideas, sergeant?"

"Not really, sir, except that a clever johnny who could fix a thing like this is just the chap to go off his rocker."

"You could be right," said Palfrey bleakly. He turned to Hill. "Have you enough men to organise a rigorous search for any other source of distribution?"

"I could use another company," Hill admitted.

"I'll arrange it," promised Palfrey.

Not long afterwards he was out of the contaminated area, being driven by one of his own agents who had been summoned by radio. The almost unbelievable thing was the normality of everything outside the stricken area. Cows and sheep grazing, here and there men working in the fields, birds flitting, a flock of rooks feeding on one freshly ploughed field. He was at Winchester police station twenty minutes after leaving Sane, and Superintendent Devine was in his office, studying reports already sent in from the village.

"I can hardly believe it," he said to Palfrey. He looked pale and shaken. "If this stuff were introduced through domestic gas pipes, or sewers or water mains—" he broke off, looking helplessly at Palfrey. "But that's why you're so worried, isn't it?"

Palfrey said: "Yes. Don't breathe a word about such a possibility to a soul."

"I won't, I promise you, but it's the kind of thing the Press might think of."

"If they suggest it to you, make light of it, will you?" Palfrey waited just long enough for Devine to nod, before going on: "Is Mr. Costain still with

Professor Storr?"

"Yes, sir. They had lunch together in a private room at the hotel."

"Any indications of where they're going?" asked Palfrey.

"One possible indication," answered Devine. "They've been in touch with a firm of estate agents in Bournemouth about an apartment or apartments. Their call to the agents was tapped."

"Bournemouth," echoed Palfrey. "They don't appear to want to go far. Is there any indication of an association between Geoffrey Drummond and Professor Storr?"

"None that I can trace," said Devine. "There's one thing, Dr. Palfrey."

"Yes?"

"I've been instructed by the Home Secretary to give you all possible assistance and absolute priority and of course I will, but—" he broke off awkwardly.

"It poses problems," Palfrey remarked drily. "I'll have a lot of my own men as well as Military Police here before the day's out, you won't be overstretched much longer. But they'll need someone with extensive local knowledge to work with them."

"Not the slightest problem about that," Devine assured him.

"Good. And my chaps will be fully briefed," Palfrey said. "Now I'm going back to London."

"There's an Army helicopter standing by for you," Devine told him, and then added in an almost embarrassed way: "I would like to say what an—er—hon—er—what a privilege it is to work with you."

"You're very good," murmured Palfrey.

Soon he was flying over the Hampshire countryside, north-east towards London. He saw village after village, country towns like Basingstoke and Odiham, and in the distance the more urban ones of Guildford, Aldershot, Reading, Newbury, and Salisbury. Every village could be as vulnerable as Sane had been, every town could be wiped out.

"Take it easy," he warned himself. "Time for panic later."

He had an appointment at six o'clock with the Home Secretary, who was the political and administrative head of home affairs and so in direct authority over the police forces of the nation, and with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. The chiefs of other police forces, and representatives from the Army and from Biological and Gas Warfare Research Departments would also be there. The conference was inescapable but he hated the thought of it. There would be hosts of questions which he couldn't answer, questions which would come out of half knowledge.

But at least he would have a few hours at the London headquarters of Z5.

Deep beneath the streets of London, spreading over a considerable area and approached by lifts from sections of the Elite Hotel in Mayfair, the headquarters of Z5 had been made as invulnerable as it was possible to be. There were three floors. On the top one, over a hundred yards beneath the streets, were the administrative offices, on the middle floor the domestic

quarters including Palfrey's regular home, and the Control Room. On the lowest floor were more sleeping accommodation, canteens, some of the more closely guarded records, and some rooms, actually 'cells' where prisoners were kept and where, in times of grave emergency, extreme measures had to be taken to make prisoners talk.

At the moment no one was in these cells.

Palfrey went down by a one-passenger lift, from the hotel foyer, stepped out within a few yards of his own office, and went inside. Waiting for him and getting some papers out of a filing cabinet close to his wide-topped desk was Joyce Morgan, his secretary and confidant. She was a good looking woman in her early thirties, with a fair complexion, dark hair, dark blue eyes. There was a directness about her expression and the way she looked at people, and an innate honesty, that Palfrey fully appreciated. Today, in this room filled with simulated daylight, she was unfeignedly glad to see him, the love she had for him easy to recognise as she welcomed him back from a situation in which his life had been in danger.

He put out his hands, gripped hers, and gave her a quick, almost impersonal hug.

"All safe," he said. "What kind of a day have you had here?"

"Hectic," she answered. "Have you had enough to eat?"

"I could manage another sandwich and some coffee."

"Good." She turned away and pressed a bell in the desk. "Five minutes, will that do?"

"Just right, bless you."

She nodded and went out, and he opened a door which led to his bedroom and bathroom, making a sudden decision to have a quick shower. Greatly invigorated, it was only a few minutes later than the time stipulated when he returned to the office. There architects and interior decorators and landscapers had worked a kind of miracle. One wall had become a huge window overlooking a lawn, flower beds, some small trees in full leaf, a table and several chairs. Joyce was in the garden, setting out coffee and cold meats. The garden was her idea, and a remarkable feat, for the lighting was a perfect simulation of daylight.

"If you're going to spend half of your life underground, you may as well have it as comfortable as you can," she had said. Now, at his approach, she turned round, eager to see him.

"Wonderful," he said. "No smog."

"Can't you forget smog for half an hour?"

"I can give it second place," he conceded.

He saw with satisfaction that the sandwiches and the coffee were exactly as he liked them, arranged with an unobtrusive regard to his small, personal preferences. He was deeply grateful, though no more than that. She knew the awful weight of the burdens he sometimes had to carry; and if he unconsciously traded on the affection she had for him she never, by word or look, allowed him to realise it.

At last he finished.

"Now," he said, commandingly.

Joyce looked at him, judging him fit to receive the full impact of her report. "The situation is not good."

"How bad?"

"There are seventy-one major cities where the carbon monoxide and sulphur oxides content in the air, with nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons, is just below or even just above the danger level to human and to plant life."

He stared at her, his mind working fast.

"Seventy-one," he echoed. "Seventeen more than at the last count. Is Los Angeles still in the lead?"

"Barely."

"Which city has caught up?"

"Tokyo," she answered. "London, Milan, Oslo—"

"*Oslo!*" Palfrey exclaimed.

"Yes," answered Joyce quietly. "Chicago, New York, Denver, Colorado, Lucerne—"

"My God," exclaimed Palfrey.

"Glasgow—" Joyce broke off. "You can see all the reports, Sap. There's no doubt that pollution in the atmosphere has increased ominously in the past month."

Palfrey nodded, slowly, fearfully.

For weeks, now, he had been studying the effect of this pollution – rather loosely defined as smog – not only on people but on plant life, and there was nothing remotely reassuring. It was so much on the increase, not only in the major industrial cities, where it might be expected, but in small cities, like Lucerne. Reports of the higher density had been coming in for a long time, and the official government and industrial research units could offer no explanation. The report had been both vivid and terrifying. It had come from Dr. Erasmus Smith, whom Palfrey had since met, Professor of the Oxford Foundation for Air Purity.

He had said:

> "The progressive contamination of the atmosphere by gases from oil, petrol and coal threatens the future of mankind. Anyone who doubts this is ignorant of the facts. Already the health of most people in city and manufacturing areas is affected. My estimate (see charts) shows a 10% loss of efficiency as a direct result. This, no doubt, the economy could stand. However, there is much worse. Respiratory diseases, leading to death as well as partial or total disability, have startlingly increased. Cancer is also a direct result, both to animal and human. Vegetation – which means food – is also seriously affected. Some areas have a productivity loss of 50% from their smog-free potential. The increasingly adverse effect on metals, stone and rubber has now been proved beyond doubt.
>
> "This is the normal estimate of progressive contamination.

> Many of the instances investigated, however, are far from normal. In some cases the density of contamination is at least five times above normal. This suggests an additionally malignant cause. Either some new constituent, in some form or another, has been introduced to one of the factors, *or* – an even greater threat – the amount of pollution is now so great as to cause some chemical reaction in the sun's rays, new to science. This *photo chemical* smog, if it increases at the same rate as it has in specified areas (see chart) for the next twelve months, could increase the death-rate by over 500%.
>
> "I am not joking. In my considered view smog is becoming a killer-gas against which there is no defence. Physicists everywhere in the world are working day and night to find if there is a natural cause of the startling increases. It is for the authorities to seek out any other, man-made, cause, and stamp it out. Better that the rate of human social progress should be delayed by a decade or so, than that civilisation should be wiped out."

Country after country had turned to Palfrey and Z5 to find if there were a man-made source, and the nations, through U.N.O., had taken the almost unprecedented step of putting all their resources of research, police and security at the Department's disposal. There were local and national conferences, at various levels; and one was to be held here, at Z5's headquarters, this evening.

So far, there had been no clues; nothing except the continuing and terrifying rate of increase in air pollution even in areas normally clear. But never before had there been a report of anything like the concentrated pollution at Sane. And never before had the once-thought 'alarmist' prophecies of Professor Smith been so terrifyingly fulfilled.

Palfrey was toying with his hair.

"Nothing else reported on the Sane scale?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing," Joyce assured him. "It's the first time there's been any indication that there might be a deliberate attempt to—" she broke off again. "But you're going to tell the Conference all this."

"Yes," agreed Palfrey. "Is the Conference Room ready?"

"Of course."

"Wall map, the lot?"

"Everything."

"Did any of those coming protest at being asked to attend?"

"I think they're very curious," Joyce said.

Palfrey smiled, a little vaguely, patted the hair down onto his forehead, pondered, and then looked down at the lists of towns and cities so grievously affected. At last, he looked up.

"Is there any further word from Winchester?"

"Professor Storr has taken three apartments on the same floor of a block

of flats on the East Cliff, at Bournemouth, but that's all."

"He doesn't let the grass grow under his feet. Costain?"

"With Professor Storr's party at the Winchester Hotel."

"There's not much doubt that Drummond was involved," Palfrey said thoughtfully. "It's quite possible that his wife may have known something of what he was doing, or at least, whom he worked with. Where is she?"

"Here."

"Conscious?"

"She was still under sedation when I saw her at two o'clock but I think they were allowing her to come round," said Joyce. "Shall I find out?"

"I'll go along and see for myself," Palfrey said.

Joyce watched him go, frowningly. She knew him in all of his moods, in his hopes and fears, and had no shadow of doubt that he was deeply worried, which meant only one thing: he was utterly baffled. He had a quality which was quite uncanny, of seeing the potential danger of almost any situation and he saw the ultimate effects in his imagination before anyone else began to understand – except, possibly, Professor Erasmus Smith.

On the lowest floor was the Z5 hospital, fully equipped for every kind of surgery and treatment, with physiotherapy rooms, heat treatment, massage, sauna baths. And there were rooms for treatment as well as for convalescence. Palfrey went down in the lift and walked along well lit passages until he came to the hospital administration offices. A young woman in a white smock and wearing a nurse's cap took him to Dr. Crabtree, who was in charge. Crabtree was a short man with a swarthy face, heavy features, thick lips – one of the least prepossessing men Palfrey knew. He was also one of the gentlest and kindest. His smile brightened his face and relieved it of the almost simian expression.

They shook hands, Palfrey towering head and shoulders above the other.

"Of course you have come about the new patient," Crabtree guessed. "I went to see her myself only half an hour ago, and she was coming round. I am not hopeful, however. Nor is Dr. Masak, who is in charge of her case. Would you like to see him in Mrs. Drummond's room?"

"Please," Palfrey said.

"Then come." Crabtree put on a white smock which, obviously not made for him, stretched over his rounded shoulders awkwardly. Palfrey put on a loose fitting smock and they went along aseptically clean passages until reaching swing doors marked: 'Observation Rooms'. Here were six small rooms in which patients could be kept under the closest observation not only medically but by means of closed-circuit television, and tape-recorders which could pick up the slightest whisper. Occasionally, a word or two uttered in sleep would give Z5 some vital clue in a case of great importance.

A very tall, dark-skinned man in a white smock was standing in front of one of the windows, earphones clamped to his pear-shaped head. He turned as the others approached, and took the earphones off. Immediately, noise came from them – squeaks of sound rather like atmospherics from a radio.

But as they drew closer, the squeaks obviously became screams which, if not muted by the earphones, could be high-pitched and wild.

"Dr. Palfrey," acknowledged the tall dark man, Dr. Masak. "I am afraid she will have to rest for a much longer period. She came round and immediately tried to kill herself."

Palfrey and Crabtree reached the one way window. In the room beyond, two male nurses were holding Mrs. Drummond down as she screamed and hurled her body about. A young woman stood, hypodermic in hand, ready to give an injection which would bring at least temporary comfort.

Gradually, one phrase forced itself onto Palfrey's conscience, a single phrase repeated over and over again.

"Let me die!" she screamed. "Let me die! … Let me die!"

At last they had her still enough to plunge the needle into her arm, and the effect was almost instantaneous. The screaming stopped, and she lay still as the corpse her anguish made her want to be.

"Guard her every minute, every second," Palfrey said. "She mustn't harm herself, and she must be ready for questioning by tomorrow morning at the absolute latest."

"If it is possible," said Dr. Masak in his courteous way, "it will be so."

Chapter Nine

The Conference

"Dr. Palfrey," Crabtree said, when they were back in his office.

"Yes?"

"You know that if we use stimulant drugs on that woman she might not recover."

"I know that only too well."

"Is it so essential to make her talk?"

"I think so," Palfrey said.

"Forgive me—but is it good enough to 'think' so when a life—or at the very least, sanity—is at stake?"

Palfrey looked at him and saw the pleading in his brown eyes. One reason, perhaps the chief reason, why Crabtree was in charge here was the depth of his compassion and the fact that he would fight desperately for every patient. This meant, in turn, that Palfrey or whoever was making decisions would be compelled to think deeply. No risk with anyone's life or sanity would ever be taken unless the risk offered the only hope of finding answers which might save not one, but hundreds, thousands, at times millions of human beings.

Palfrey smiled.

"Before we use the drugs," he said, "I will be absolutely sure."

He went away, straight up to the Operations Room. He was so used to it that the big chamber did not have the impact on him that it would have on a stranger, and still had on agents who saw it only occasionally. It was the nerve centre of Z5, and it was the creation of Palfrey and several electronic experts who had built it over the years. It had one high wall, built in a half-circle, which showed the whole world in a Mercator relief with embellishments which made the identification of every part of it easier to follow. Two of the minders of this wall – each a physicist of high repute – were always on duty; there was a staff of eight, with a relief for each man.

On the wall immediately opposite this was the control panel. From this Z5 could get in touch with its tens of thousands of agents throughout the world, and take reports from all of them. In the room beyond this panel were the records of the agents, dossiers on each one giving every conceivable detail about their activities and their potential. There had been times when assaults had been made on the agents and as recently as the past year there had been widespread defections caused by a brain-washing drug which had caused divided loyalties.[1] But this was over. Today, every agent in every country in the world was known to be absolutely reliable.

And on the previous day each had been instructed to check the local situation for carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide – in other words, smog. These were the reports which Joyce had referred to and now Palfrey studied the reports more closely. He had an almost photographic memory but he

had never concentrated more than he did that day to assess the facts, so that he could present them to those who would be at the conference.

At five minutes to six, chairs had been placed in the Operations Room as for a small meeting on a revolving 'stage' so that if Palfrey wanted to refer his audience to the world map or to the Control and Report panels, they would find themselves being turned round. This was a recent innovation which had never been used extensively before.

At three minutes to six, the Home Secretary – Mr. Alan Clitheroe – arrived with Sir Maxwell Denton, the Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard. They were followed closely by the others who had been briefed to attend. Almost the last to come in, by Palfrey's special invitation, was a short, tubby, cherubic-looking man with a mop of iron-grey hair. This was Professor Erasmus Smith.

When they were all seated, Palfrey explained briefly how they would be rotated on the turntable, and then, his back to the map wall, he began to talk of his fears.

"You understand, gentlemen," he said, "that I am not directly responsible to the British or to any one government, but to all. The danger of smog is hardly a new one, and might not be considered a case for Z5 to investigate but for the fact that there is no world authority attempting to deal with the problem. We all know the gravity of air pollution in certain cities; what hasn't been obvious until the past year or two is the increased danger in many of them—and in parts of the countryside of highly populated countries where there is a concentration of automobiles."

He paused; and one of the Civil Servants asked: "Isn't there some degree of exaggeration in assessments of the pollution, Dr. Palfrey?"

Erasmus Smith turned a snort into a sharp cough.

"Conceivably," said Palfrey, evading Smith's eye. "But there is much greater danger in underestimating the pollution. At the request of national and international conferences, we have been watching the situation very closely. There was a purely arbitrary figure of .05% as the maximum safety level—any greater proportion being irritating to all human beings and animals, dangerous to some, even lethal to others. There have been estimates also of the danger to plant life and to fruit and vegetables of any higher proportion than .05%. In Los Angeles, when the cloud-cover has been low or when there has been no wind, the concentration has sometimes been as high as .09% but this was exceptional. Only on certain days and in certain atmospheric conditions is this likely. However, at the beginning of Z5's inquiries, only eleven cities reached the danger level of .05% pollution on more than ten days in a year. Certain facts were then known. Photo-chemical smog does not occur by night, for instance. Sulphurous pollution is usually stronger in cold weather than in warm, while the widespread use of air-conditioning in the United States of America also creates a high rate of sulphurous pollution. Winds, rain and temperature, these, too, have an effect on the density of smog. *Irrespective* of these factors, however, the overall

degree of increase has been quite startling." He paused, and some figures were thrown onto a small screen close to him. "Here are the original ten cities: Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Chicago, New York, Milan, Glasgow, Essen, Pittsburgh and Detroit."

The names, placed in a column, showed up clearly on the screen.

"After three months a further twenty-nine cities were added," Palfrey said, and this time he simply gave his audience time to read the names, now in three columns. "In another three months we were up to forty-eight cities and the latest figures show that seventy-one cities and towns are affected. The best way to show the rate of growth is through the world projection. The cities in the first list are shown with a red light—" The brightness in the room faded and tiny red lights appeared in ten places; the names of the cities showed in white. "Now, the blue light represents the first three months' growth." Now, lights appeared all over the projection, but there was a noticeable concentration on highly industrialised areas, particularly London, the Midlands and Manchester in England, Ohio, Illinois and New York in the United States, in Tokyo and parts of Europe. "You see there is very little in the emergent countries, more in South America, Africa, only one in China—Pekin—and only one in Russia—Moscow. However, when the next count was taken there were several small towns and districts in countries where there is little concentration of industry and where there is still very little motor traffic. These places are shown by the pink lights."

He stopped speaking, and studied the faces of the men who sat there – each looking from one light to another, absorbing what they saw as well as what they were being told. Even Professor Smith seemed impressed by Palfrey's grasp of the situation.

"Now—the amber lights show the new concentrations," Palfrey went on.

The room went a little darker, and the lights against the cities showed up much more vividly. The whole world seemed to be covered; Bombay and Calcutta now appeared in India, Buenos Aires in the Argentine, Johannesburg in South Africa, Canton in China, Leningrad and one of the Ural cities in Russia, Copenhagen, Oslo and Brussels.

A man said: "This is alarming, surely."

"A report has been sent each three months to all governments," Palfrey said. "Some countries have taken special remedial steps, the major car manufacturing nations either have already introduced or are about to introduce legislation to control the most common form of contamination—through the exhausts of motorcars. However, powerful lobbies against this expensive control have been fairly successful, and there is not a single instance of an area having a diminishing concentration."

"What has our attitude been in England?" one man asked.

Palfrey glanced at the Home Secretary.

"Sceptical," answered Clitheroe, bluntly.

"Has it been taken seriously anywhere before this?" the Minister of Food and Agriculture asked. He was an elderly man, a practical farmer, an astute politician. "I confess that we have been sceptical despite warnings from the

United States."

"I'd like to go into what warnings there have been later," Palfrey said. "Certainly the danger from smog has been taken more seriously in America than elsewhere but powerful lobbies in Washington have slowed down legislation. One thing should be made clear, however. Until yesterday there was no indication anywhere in the world that the contamination of the atmosphere was other than incidental—the gradual growth of the motorcar and greater concentrations of industry. Professor Smith—" he nodded towards Smith and others turned towards the tubby little man – "warned us that it was possibly a natural phenomenon, but also made it clear that it might be due to some additive constituent in fuel. We are looking for any such. And in the Hampshire village of Sane, only yesterday morning, there was a concentration of smog so great that—"

Palfrey stopped speaking, and instead of the lists of zones, a moving picture appeared – of the village of Sane buried under the pall of smog. There were pictures of the surrounding countryside, of the roofs of houses and the church tower, of the Manor, of the way the smog had crept towards the Manor only that morning.

At last, Palfrey began to speak again.

"As you will have read, there were no survivors in the village. It is likely to be weeks before the affected area can be decontaminated. There is little doubt that this morning's release of the gas was quite deliberate."

"But *why?*" demanded one of the Army representatives.

"Possibly as a demonstration of what can be done," Palfrey replied. "It hardly needs saying that if concentrations of the smog were to be released through any major service—gas, water, sewage or even electric conduit, a whole town could be wiped out as quickly and as easily as the village was. And that is my concern, gentlemen," Palfrey added, grimly. "The possible imminence of the danger."

After a long pause, Clitheroe said: "I don't really understand you, Palfrey. Why should this one instance suggest widespread danger? The cumulative harmful effect I can understand, but I don't follow your reasoning over the Sane disaster."

Palfrey didn't speak at once.

"Good question," said the Army representative.

"Yes, indeed," said the Minister of Food.

"Easy to answer," said a man named Endicott who was from Fulton, one of the nation's leading experts on poison gases. He was a tall, bald-headed man wearing heavy, horn-rimmed spectacles. "You need to know why the concentrations all round the world are so much greater, don't you, Palfrey? Is it the gradual increase due to greater use of petrol and other oils, aided and abetted by neglect, or has it been created wilfully? If the latter, there must be supplies in certain areas and means of distribution easily available."

"Oh, come," a man protested. It was Professor Golden, prominent at the Meteorological Office, deeply concerned in investigation into smog. In his thirties, he had the earnest look of a student fresh from college. "Why

should anyone want to step up the smog content anywhere?"

"There could be a dozen answers to that question," said London's Commissioner of Police. "I don't like this situation one little bit. Do you, sir?" He turned to Clitheroe, an austere, military man who looked far more the type to carry big responsibilities than Clitheroe, who was smallish, with fluffy hair and rather plump cheeks.

Professor Erasmus Smith now sat with his eyes closed, like a sleeping cherub – except that his lower lip was thrust forward pugnaciously.

"Can't be happy, obviously," Clitheroe said. "On the other hand we need to know much more about the situation before we can begin to cope. Palfrey, have you any positive reason to believe that this smog *does* at present constitute an urgent threat to any part of London—of England, for that matter?"

"No," admitted Palfrey.

"Could the incident at Sane have been an isolated one. Some experiment gone wrong, for instance?"

"It's possible," Palfrey conceded. "But it certainly wouldn't be safe to assume so." Tall and oddly impressive, he looked round the group as the lights went up. "I *think* there is a certain amount of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the increased concentrations in England cannot be explained by any normal, natural growth. I think it essential that the situation be investigated as a matter of extreme urgency. I have the assurance of the Fulton authorities that the Sane disaster could in no way have been started or fostered by the experimental and research station there." The Fulton man nodded emphatically. "And there is no evidence that any local or national authority is involved," continued Palfrey. "I propose to send detailed reports – recordings of this evening's discussion and copies of the photographs – to all governments, asking them to begin immediate investigations. If I could say that this meeting supported my recommendation it would help very much indeed." He paused, then looked straight at Clitheroe, and asked: "Will *you* authorise an immediate investigation here in England, sir? Starting at once?"

"Without the slightest hesitation," Clitheroe said. "If there is some group of individuals deliberately causing the increased concentration we need to find out urgently. If on the other hand it is a kind of natural growth there must be a cause, some new ingredient in petrol or diesel oil or some other fuel. Whichever it is, we have to find out. I can tell you, Palfrey, that there is a Cabinet meeting due at Number 10 at half-past nine, to deal with—well, never mind. I have little doubt that the Cabinet will support my recommendation. Will you wait until then before sending to other governments?"

"Yes, of course," said Palfrey.

"Thank you. Now I have to be away from here in twenty-five minutes," Clitheroe went on, contriving to create the impression that his going would be on urgent matters of state, rather than for dinner before a Cabinet meeting. "I would like to be briefed as quickly as possible."

Now, Professor Smith opened his eyes and opened his mouth and waited with obvious impatience.

Chapter Ten

The Briefing

"Yes, of course." Palfrey answered Clitheroe, mildly. "I would like Professor Erasmus Smith of the Oxford Foundation for Air Purity to talk to us. Will twenty-five minutes be long enough, Dr. Smith?"

Smith, his eyes flashing with sincerity, rose from the back of the group.

"*Ten minutes* will suffice to scare the hair off the back of your neck. Since the Air Pollution Conference in Los Angeles—"

"Will you be good enough to come up here and use the microphone?" Palfrey asked.

"It will lose a minute, and there are so few left before the Home Secretary has to go—" Smith beamed at Clitheroe as he passed him, joined Palfrey, and stood in front of the table microphone. "Never did like these damned things …" boomed out, and the microphone squealed faintly. Palfrey adjusted it as Smith began to wave his arms as if he were conducting an orchestra. "As I was saying last year, there was an international convention —conference to you, gentlemen—on board the late lamented *Queen Mary*— on the matter of air pollution. That was *before* the dramatic increases in concentration which Palfrey has outlined to us from figures submitted by the International Conference Secretariat—*we* take it very seriously, you see—"

"Dr.—ah—Dr. Smith," interrupted Clitheroe, "time *is* of the essence."

"And don't I know it!" retorted Smith, beaming. "Shall we or shan't we have enough time and air to *breathe* in the future? Do I need to remind you, gentlemen, that man—in fact all life, including plant life—depends on the supply of oxygen in the air. Too little oxygen and there would come a time when the air could be (a) so rarefied and (b) so polluted that human life became virtually impossible. Our lungs would burst within us, so to speak —"

"This is surely not a conference on science fiction—" interrupted Clitheroe again.

"*Science fiction!*" roared Smith. "Don't be a bloody fool! My God, you politicians—"

"Dr. Palfrey, I really must protest," said Clitheroe, half-rising.

"Why don't you keep quiet until Dr. Smith's finished?" demanded Endicott. "You imposed the time limit."

"All right, all right, I apologise," said Erasmus Smith, grandly. "Politicians and I never seem to see eye to eye and I've been trying to make them understand for years that we scientists are not inhabitants of the lunatic fringe. I can supply facts and figures in alarming quantities to substantiate what I am about to say. We have been carrying out experiments throughout the world to discover the effect of contamination of the atmosphere by carbon mon – and carbon dioxide. Results: shattering. Concentrations of over 10% are, we know, lethal. Lock yourself in your own garage with the

engine of your car running and you won't live to announce the result. Put plants such as tomatoes, all soft fruits, and green vegetables in an atmosphere polluted by 10% and they (a) absorb enough to make them nearly as effective as arsenic in the human stomach and (b) die. And topsoil, no matter how well fertilised, loses its body and the roots of all these things begin to wither. Given a sufficient concentration not lethal in itself, and man won't be able to grow enough food to live on—and think of *this,* gentlemen." He almost glared at Clitheroe, who was still bridling. "Think of this in conjunction with the world population; the (a) increase in live births, (b) increase in survival age of human beings, (c) decrease according to consumption ratio of food supplies. More people, more cars, more petrol or gasoline, more air pollution, less food, more chest, lung and bronchial ailments, more patients, fewer doctors in proportion, fewer nurses, fewer hospital beds—we are going the right way to wipe out the human race. *Slide!*"

While everyone, including Clitheroe, stared almost breathlessly at the man from whom the words were flooding, the lights were dimmed and a coloured slide appeared on the screen – of a dozen rows of tomatoes, red and sunripened, ready to pick. "Slide!" barked Smith, and another slide showed leaves wilting and tomatoes becoming yellow and wrinkled. "Result of 10% pollution in greenhouse atmosphere after twenty-four hours, absolutely authenticated, a dozen experiments being carried out under strictest conditions of scientific control. *Slide.*" A picture appeared of half the tomatoes off the branches, all of them withered to wrinkled skin, the green of the leaves dead and brown, a mush of yellow at the foot of each plant. "Forty-eight hours," Smith declared. "You see, gentlemen, the result of growing the food humans need in a heavily polluted atmosphere—potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, celery, pumpkins, beans, peas, soft fruits, wheat, corn, rye —you name the food and I've a picture of it. *Human slides.* Now I will show you some photographs of the human respiratory system after breathing air of a certain density of pollution. Take 5% … After one week … two weeks … three weeks … four … Hospital cases with post-operational photographs show the destructive effect of the pollution on the human tissues, one month of living in this concentration will probably so rot the tissues or cause such an advanced degree of cancer …"

Slide after slide appeared, each worse than the one before.

Smith talked for another ten minutes, conveying five times more than many men could have done in the same period, with a curiously compelling vividness. And all the time the slides *click-click-clicked* into position on the screen, showing pictures of human beings, mice, rabbits, monkeys and dogs, then of plant and tree life, all of it rotting, all of it dying.

At last, Smith stopped with the peremptory command: "Lights." As the lights came on, he barked: "Any questions?"

"Yes," said the Police Commissioner very slowly. "How can one stop it?"

"Three things would help," answered Smith, and his words came like pistol shots. "*One:* abolish cars with the internal combustion engine and

don't say that's nonsense, nuclear powered vehicles are within sight, electrically propelled vehicles already available. *Two:* abolish all discharge of industrial power waste into the atmosphere and into rivers. *Three,* and most immediately practical, find a gas which will cancel out the poison content, and leave the oxygen content free for humans and plant life to breathe. Can't say much progress has yet been made. The car manufacturers of Detroit and elsewhere have been working on car exhaust systems, but—"

"Dr. Smith," Clitheroe interrupted, rather creakily.

"Sir."

"Can all of this be thoroughly documented?"

"Thoroughly."

"Then why hasn't it been brought to the notice of the proper authorities?"

"My God, I've been screeching about it for years!"

"I can hardly believe it."

"You see what I mean by political obstinacy."

"*My* department—"

"Your department receives a monthly review of the statistics and the official government department prognostications. So does the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. So does the Meteorological Office. So—oh, everyone gets them and they either go in the file or in the waste paper basket. No one ever replies—no one ever asks for elaboration of statements made."

"I really can't believe it," Clitheroe said, hoarsely. He looked very tired, as if the session had exhausted him.

"That's right, call me a liar," said Smith, without any umbrage. "The only man who has ever really shown interest, outside the different Foundations, Research Institutes and Universities, has been Dr. Palfrey—Z5. Didn't you tell me that *you* have advised the various governments from time to time, Palfrey?"

"Yes," Palfrey said. "I—"

"And the response?"

"In most cases very prompt," Palfrey said. "I have had the whole resources of Z5 working to find out the cause of the increased pollution, and most governments have cooperated. But the investigation has so far been carried out secretly. We—"

"*Why,* in God's name?" cried Smith.

"Because we saw no point in causing the public to panic," Palfrey said. "We have everything at the ready, all governments alerted. A tape-recorded report of this conference will be received by every government within forty-eight hours. The conference was necessary to make sure that every department concerned took the brakes off. This needs absolute priority."

Erasmus Smith squeaked. "It should have had it long ago! I warned them. My experiments showed conclusively how deadly—"

"No doubt the authorities did not believe that the degree of concentration of the gases in the atmosphere could ever reach the proportions which you created in your experiments," Palfrey said.

"Dr. Palfrey," said the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police,

“supposing there was a concentration of the smog in a densely populated area, what could be done as of this moment?”

Palfrey was toying with his hair.

“As far as I know, very little.”

“*And* you’re right,” breathed Smith.

“Would there be time for an evacuation?” asked the Army and Civil Defence representatives almost simultaneously.

“None,” said Endicott, without hesitation. “A high concentration would not necessarily kill immediately but it would incapacitate.”

“I don’t altogether agree,” objected one man. “Unless the concentration was built up during the night when everyone was asleep.”

“In any case the roads would become so jammed, nobody could get away in time,” Smith argued. “With the cars at a standstill, engines running, the situation would quickly get out of hand. There would be no time for an evacuation. A few might escape, but very few. A whole community could be wiped out in an hour, Mr. Home Secretary—”

“I shall do everything in my power to improve your opinion of politicians,” stated Clitheroe heavily. “I really think I should go. If you will excuse me, Dr. Palfrey.”

“We’ll have a break for half an hour,” Palfrey said, and Joyce, who had been at the back of the room, signalled to two men who came in with trays and trolleys laden with food and drink. Palfrey went along to the lift with Clitheroe, who was very subdued but who turned to face Palfrey as the lift door opened.

“You will have my absolute cooperation, Palfrey. I shall dedicate myself to this.”

Palfrey, looking into pale grey eyes, read not only the signs of shock but grim determination.

Five minutes later, the Home Secretary’s car started off from the Elite Hotel, a police escort car following.

At the very moment that the Home Secretary’s car began to move, the Deputy Governor of the State of Wyoming, in America, was moving away in his car from a fund-raising luncheon party. He was sober, replete and happy, noting with pleasure the brightness of the sun blazing down on the roofs of the hundreds of automobiles moving along the two lane highway towards the city centre.

The Governor sniffed.

“Don’t often notice smog like this,” he remarked to his wife.

“I noticed it in Estes Park last Sunday,” his wife remarked. “We were driving along that road where all the muskrats and the chipmunks were.”

“Road cut through a valley,” her husband said, and sniffed again, then rubbed his eyes. “It stings, too.”

“Just like it did when we were in Los Angeles in the summer,” agreed his wife.

The Deputy Governor gazed at the mountains which stretched across

Yellowstone Park and the Grand Tetons, and sniffed again.

"Perhaps it's some pep they're putting in the gas," his wife remarked casually. "They—" She broke off, catching her breath, and tears began to sting her eyes. "Joe, do you want to shut the windows and put on the air-conditioning?"

"Good idea," her husband agreed.

Then, a passing car swerved and almost smacked broadside on. The driver, with a scared expression, was wiping his eyes. The lights ahead turned red and the Deputy Governor slowed down. On the sidewalk, people were coughing. Suddenly there was a crunch of sound, the rending of metal on metal, and two cars were locked together; both drivers had their hands at their faces. Another car stopped alongside the Deputy Governor's, and tears were pouring down his face.

"Joe!" his wife gasped. "It's hurting my throat. It's going right down into my lungs! *Joe!*" she repeated with sudden, rasping hoarseness. "*Joe*—"

Police sirens blared.

Two more cars crashed.

The lights turned green but dozens of vehicles were now stationary, the drivers getting out handkerchiefs to wipe their eyes. A scarlet Thunderbird, coming fast, ignored the lights and raced between the stationary cars, weaving from lane to lane – and others followed, all of them heading towards the mountains.

All the time there was the dull throb, throb, throb, of auto-engines turning slowly.

"We've got to stop the engines," the Deputy Governor gasped. "They're burning up the air. They—" He pushed open the door of the car and staggered onto the road. Almost at once he began to cough, then to choke. Tears streamed down his cheeks and yet the saliva in his mouth had dried up.

The door of a car opposite him was open, the driver half-in, half-out of the car, obviously unconscious, one hand caught against the door handle, supporting him. The radio of this car was blaring a song; then suddenly there was a man's voice.

"This is WYIG, your friendly station Mountview-Wyoming." The voice was hoarse and rasping. "There is an emergency in the City of Mountview … A poisonous gas so far unidentified is spreading from Yellowstone Road north towards the downtown area … My God, I'm looking out of my window and right now I can see people collapsing on the sidewalk … They're dying on their feet … Don! Don! Close all the doors, keep the air-conditioning on … Get me the Police Department … Police, I told you, the cops … What's that? … No answer? … Don, you can dial direct to Cheyenne … Do that, I want to talk to the Police Department in Cheyenne … Hallo? Hallo, who's calling? … Sure, this is WYIG Wyoming … What's that? … Panic? … Which highways are clear? Yellowstone south … okay, sure, I'm broadcasting, hallo folks, this is WYIG, your friendly station … Highways Yellowstone south, that's 14 and 16, are clear of the gas … They're blocked

to the north … Highway 287 north and south are clear … What's that? … My God, there's gas concentrating in Middle Valley Road, that's on 789 north and south … Hallo. Hallo! I—God, this office is filling up with gas … Yellow gas … my *God! It's coming in through the air-conditioner.* I can see it rolling in."

He began to cough and splutter.

The Deputy Governor didn't hear; he was in a crumpled heap by the side of his car, and his wife was leaning back inside, her breath coming and going in a fluttering shudder.

Chapter Eleven

The Alarm

At ten-thirty that evening, Palfrey heard that the British Cabinet had recommended the adoption of the Z5 report and an immediate priority investigation into the causes of the increasing carbon monoxide content in the atmosphere.

At ten forty-one, the first report of the disaster at Mountview, Wyoming, reached Palfrey. The reports came from Cheyenne; Denver, Colorado; Grand Rapids, South Dakota and a number of small towns where the radio stations had picked up the messages from WYIG. Immediately Cheyenne had learned of the situation, units of the Army's anti-gas warfare section had been flown by helicopter to the scene and masked men with protective clothing dropped into the city. Aerial photographs were taken, rushed to Cheyenne, telecast, and picked up by major networks and sent around the world.

At eleven twenty-seven, Palfrey was in his room at Z5 Headquarters with Joyce and three other assistants when the pictures were flashed on the television screen, and with the pictures, reports: "Mountview, Wyoming, is a town with a population of 7,142 people …

"First estimates say 750 people have died …

"Second estimates say that over 1,000 people have died …

"It is understood that over 3,000 people mostly from the south and east of Mountview were unaffected by the gas, now known to be smog of rare density. These families have begun an orderly evacuation of the city, organised by the military."

And as the reports were broadcast, the pictures were shown, of wrecked cars and the bodies of people strewing the sidewalks, people half in and half out of their cars, people staggering about helplessly as the gas caught up with them.

"The official count of fatalities in the town of Mountview has now reached over 2,000, over a quarter of the population … Whole areas of the town have been saturated … Countless small fires have started from furnaces left unattended, crashed automobiles, electrical failures … Colonel James Wolsinger, in charge of the relief work, has now over 200 troops all fully equipped for gas warfare, at Mountview … Washington has announced the assignment of further rescue parties from Army Depots in Denver, Colorado; Salt Lake City and Ogden, Utah; Butte and Great Falls, Montana … other detachments are likely to leave shortly from Northern and Southern California …

"The first analysis of the gas which has engulfed Mountview, Wyoming, has now come in. It is carbon monoxide with sulphur oxides, the constituent commonly found in the exhaust of motor vehicles and aeroplanes, widely known as smog … Troops are already investigating the causes of the sudden increase in air pollution … It is understood that just prior to this outbreak a

request was made by the world organisation known as Z5 that all governments should immediately begin to investigate the causes of increased concentration in a list of over seventy cities throughout the world … This recommendation, which has the full support of the British Government, followed shortly after the engulfment of a small English village by a gas believed to be very similar to that which has stricken the population of Mountview …"

"Well, if there'd been any hesitation before, there would be none now," Joyce said. "Sap—"

He looked at her, his expression withdrawn and shocked.

"Yes?"

"Five thousand miles away."

"I know."

"It doesn't make sense."

"It depends what you mean by sense," said Palfrey with an effort. "There must be a reason."

"Sap—"

"Joyce," Palfrey said, "I know how you feel. But don't talk, unless you can think of some constructive suggestion."

"I'm sorry," Joyce said. "I'm just—baffled. Baffled. When I stop talking all I can see are the people who've died—who are dying."

"And others who might start to die anywhere at any time," Palfrey said gruffly. "I know. But—"

He broke off as a buzzer sounded and a green light showed on one of the several telephones at his desk. He lifted this instrument, and a girl said: "Superintendent Devine of Winchester would like to speak to you, sir."

"Yes—put him through," Palfrey pressed down a switch which broadcast the incoming call into the room through muted loudspeakers in each corner. "Hallo, Superintendent. No more trouble in Sane, I hope."

"Not in Sane, sir," Devine said. He hesitated and there was a catch in his breath, warning Palfrey that he had something very unpleasant to say. "They've—they've disappeared, sir."

Palfrey thought: "They." He saw mental pictures of Storr, the two women, young Philip and old Harrison. "All five of them?" he asked, not yet able to assess the significance of this.

"All six, sir."

"*Six?* Including Costain?"

"Yes, sir. I—I'm afraid they fooled me about going to Bournemouth. I'd alerted the Bournemouth police and all the roads from Winchester to Bournemouth were under patrol. They started out from the Winchester Hotel and—well, they disappeared somewhere in the New Forest. I've an uneasy feeling—" Devine broke off, catching his breath again. "I've an uneasy feeling that they had an aircraft somewhere in the Forest."

"They might have," agreed Palfrey. He saw Joyce move towards the door, and go out. "If Storr and his household have decamped, we don't need

telling they're involved, do we?"

"No, sir. There's one positive thing."

"Yes."

"There's a tunnel from the Manor to Drummond's place, and in the basement at the Manor a small laboratory with a good sprinkling of Drummond's fingerprints. So they worked together all right."

"Anything of importance in the laboratory?" asked Palfrey, sharply.

"Lieutenant Hill is in charge there, sir."

"I'll get in touch with him. Thanks, Superintendent."

"I—I feel pretty sick about it, sir, especially after seeing some of those pictures on television about the town in the United States. Did you expect anything like that here?"

"Let's say I wasn't surprised," said Palfrey gruffly. "Goodnight."

He flicked the instrument off, and looked at the doorway which Joyce had left ajar. He moved towards the big window and stood looking into the artificial moonlight, and it was difficult to believe that the crescent moon and the dim stars were not real. He heard Joyce come in and turned to face her.

"Why didn't we know?" he asked helplessly. "Why didn't we know in time?"

"The information was sent, but it has not yet been passed through to you," Joyce said. "There were three reports—that the car in which all six were travelling evaded the police watch at the Cadnam Roundabout. Our agents reported that it took the Downton-Salisbury road. The car itself has been located near the Rufus Stone, deep in the Forest, and a helicopter was stored at the back of an old inn, about half a mile away."

Palfrey said: "That's better." He did not ask where the reports had come from: Z5 was so highly organised that he took it for granted that part-time agents had been alerted all over the area and would keep headquarters closely in touch. "And the helicopter?"

"At a guess it looked as if it might be heading for Shannon Airport."

"Ah," said Palfrey. "Have them watched without being alarmed. If they fly to the U.S.A.—"

"There is a Boeing 707 of the Dominican Airways due to leave Shannon in an hour and a half," Joyce told him. "And six seats have been reserved on it for New York in the name of Harrison."

"Ah—so they made room for Costain," Palfrey said.

"There's certainly room," Joyce conceded. "Whether they will—well, we shall find out before long."

"Yes," said Palfrey. After a pause, he went on: "Is Crabtree still on duty, do you know?"

"He will be, if you want him."

"Yes," said Palfrey again. "Did you hear about the laboratory which had Geoffrey Drummond's prints on it, beneath the Manor?"

"No," said Joyce, heavily. "So they'd been working together all the time."

"And we simply have to find out what Grace Drummond knows," Palfrey

said. “I’ll go down, I think. Tell Crabtree I’m on the way, will you? I want to talk to Hill at the Manor. Are we in direct contact?”

“By radio, yes. Shall I tell Control—”

“You tell Crabtree. I’ll go to Control,” Palfrey said.

He knew himself well, was aware of an increasing restlessness which would remain until some clear course of action opened. And at this moment he was simply receiving shock after shock and absorbing each, fitting it into the pattern. There was one ominous fact: if he was right in his suspicions of Storr, the release of the smog in Mountview showed the strength of Storr’s hand – or the hand of those who worked with him. At the back of Palfrey’s mind there was the possibility that Storr was not directly involved and might be under some kind of pressure, but it seemed a thousand to one that he was a prime mover.

And if the smog could saturate two places as far apart as Mountview, Wyoming and Sane, Hampshire, then whoever had caused the saturation might, as easily, be able to wipe out other small places … or whole cities.

Were the two saturations meant as a kind of warning? Would his investigation follow a pattern which seemed to be established when a group of individuals threatened society? He had become all too familiar with the pattern: demonstrations of power, such as these, followed by some form of ultimatum.

Until he knew, there could be no peace within him. There were moments, such as this, when he preferred to be out of his office, where he could get some kind of reassurance by seeing others working, by reminding himself visually of the great organisation behind him and the support now promised for it.

The Control Room was behind the Operations Room. Here, a dozen men were watching the great computers and the calls that were coming in from all over the world – some of them a dozen at a time. The computers, serving different parts of the world, received messages and these were passed along in the form of perforated tape which went through a smaller machine for the message to be translated into any language desired – usually English. On another section, if telephone calls were wanted, almost instant contact would be made anywhere in the world.

A fresh-faced youth was at the radio-telephone control, and scrambled to his feet.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Get me Lieutenant Hill at Sane Manor, will you?”

“I’m having trouble keeping contact there, sir—can’t quite understand it,” said the youth.

“Try again,” Palfrey urged.

He could see Costain’s face in his mind’s eye, and asked himself if there was any possibility that Costain would be able to help. He saw Grace Drummond’s face, set in such awful distress, and wondered if she had any knowledge at all locked in her mind about her husband’s association with Storr. He wondered whether he were right to allow Storr to fly the Atlantic,

and not to arrange for the Irish authorities to detain him. This, in one way, was the crux of his case. Storr and his friends were the one positive lead. If he detained them and failed to get the needed information he would have no lead left.

They had to go free, and be trailed.

At Shannon; on the Boeing 707; at Kennedy Airport; on whatever aircraft, road or train they left on, Z5 agents had to trace them, and unless the system broke down Palfrey would soon know their final destination. It might be a very long time before he knew why Storr had taken Costain with him.

If Geoffrey Drummond and Professor Storr had been working together, had Costain also known more than he had admitted? Had he worked with them, supplying his engineering and chemical knowledge? Had he, Palfrey, taken too great a risk in trusting a man without first screening him? He could hardly blame himself; at the time the one vital need had been to try to get a contact in the Storr household. There had not been the slightest reason to suspect that the whole household would decamp. He wondered where young Hill was and why there was no contact with him and with Sane Manor. He watched the fresh-faced youth at the radio control, saw the dozens of messages coming from all parts of the world – and then saw the young face go tense. He moved forward, seeing the swift glance the other shot at him.

At last, the message was received, and the operator, obviously appalled, turned to face Palfrey.

“Sane Manor has been blown up, sir,” he stated precisely. “With the rest of the village and the surrounding countryside. Only one of the Special Unit investigating survived and he’s in hospital and not expected to live.”

Palfrey simply stared, unable, for a second or two, to take in this last disaster. After what seemed a long time, he turned towards the door.

“I shall be down with Dr. Crabtree,” he said, hoarsely.

He meant that he would be down below, trying to make Grace Drummond talk.

Chapter Twelve

The Questioning

The woman lay on the narrow bed, her face wax-like, the face of a corpse. Her flesh had shrunk, leaving her nose more prominent, her chin and cheekbones, too. It was hard to believe that she was breathing. The two men, Palfrey and Crabtree, were outside the room, looking at her through the one way window. Near her pillow were microphones which picked up the slightest sound.

Half an hour earlier, Crabtree had given her an injection which would so sensitise her brain that when the questioning began, she would answer, out of her subconscious.

"Dr. Palfrey," Crabtree whispered.

"Yes."

"I do not like the response she gives."

"Do you mean that she may not live?"

"I mean that if her response was normal she would be stirring by now."

"We have to try," Palfrey said.

"If we could allow her another twenty-four hours to regain her strength," began Crabtree, "she might—"

"We haven't twenty-four minutes," said Palfrey.

A light glowed above a telephone fitted to the wall close by him. It was a relief to pick it up.

"Palfrey."

"Sap," said Joyce. "Stefan is on the line, from Moscow."

"Stefan," echoed Palfrey, and momentarily his heart leapt, this was the first moment of pleasure he had felt during this awful day. Stefan Andromovitch was the second in command of Z5, stationed much of the time in Russia. "Has he given you any idea what he wants?"

"There has been an eruption of smog in a town in the Urals."

Palfrey said: "I'll talk to him at once."

He was staring at the woman and saw her head move, for the first time. There was a faint click in his ear, and he said: "Stefan."

"Sap," Stefan Andromovitch said, "there is great anxiety here."

No preamble; no greeting or pleasantries. On this Z5 'hot line' between Moscow and London there was just the simple statement which told Palfrey that Stefan himself was under great pressure – either of events, or because others were with him.

"There is plenty of anxiety here," Palfrey remarked.

"How long have you known of the danger?"

"You have been informed hour by hour."

"Your first emergency intimation was yesterday, then?"

"Yes—the first *emergency* one."

Palfrey felt more sure that Stefan had others with him. These would be

men whom he was anxious to convince that no information had been kept from him. His English was very precise at times, but after he had mixed with English-speaking people for a few days, could be almost colloquial.

"These figures were not taken with sufficient seriousness here."

"They weren't taken seriously anywhere," Palfrey said.

"Is there any hope of finding the source?"

"Hope," said Palfrey. "There is always hope."

He saw Grace Drummond's head move again and her eyes opened and she stared with curious intensity at the ceiling, then towards the window which was to her a black square patch in the wall.

"This Professor Storr?"

"He is about to board a Boeing 707 at Shannon Airport," Palfrey told Stefan. "He is being followed closely."

There was a pause, and during it a whisper came from the loudspeaker built into the wall just above the window. Then Grace Drummond's lips moved.

"*No," the whisper came. "No, I cannot remember.*"

Crabtree, some feet away from Palfrey, was speaking to her: "It is of vital importance—did your husband ever visit Professor Storr?"

"Sap," Stefan Andromovitch said.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you arrest Professor Storr?"

"I want him to lead us to the main source."

"Could he not be persuaded to talk?"

"*No!*" *cried Grace Drummond. "No, I never talked business with Geoff. Never!*"

"*What did he do all day?*"

"*He was a writer.*"

"*Where did he write?*"

"*There was a shed in the garden, he went there for quiet.*"

"*What did he write?*"

"*I can't remember,*" *she groaned.*

"What is the sound in the background?" Stefan asked. "It sounds as if you are in consultation with—"

"I'm trying to make Geoffrey Drummond's wife – widow – recall any form of association between her husband and Storr. You received the report saying that Drummond appeared to be involved, and that there was a communicating tunnel between the shed in the grounds of his house and Sane Manor."

"Yes."

"There is another report, just in. Sane Manor has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?"

"Blown up, with the whole village," Palfrey said.

"So—Storr must have been deeply involved."

"Yes."

"*I don't know!*" *Grace Drummond cried and the voice was magnified until it*

seemed to reverberate about the room. "I don't know!"

"*He must have told you," Crabtree insisted.*

"*I don't remember!" she cried again, and her head was turning from side to side and her eyes were rolling.*

"*Was he working with Professor Storr?*"

"*I don't know!" she screamed.*

"*But you must know. You saw him every day, you must have talked with him about his work.*"

"*I didn't, I didn't, I didn't!" she gasped.*

"Sap," said Stefan, "the report and the recommendation from Downing Street have been received and I am assured by Mr. Bretislov, who is with me now, that the Kremlin will give us full support in this investigation. Russia will recommend to the other nations in the Warsaw Pact that they do the same. However, there is great anxiety, for fear Professor Storr should escape."

"There is no reason to think he will escape," retorted Palfrey.

"But if he should, what other contact will you have?"

"None," answered Palfrey. "But—"

"Sap."

"Quiet!" Palfrey interrupted, for he saw the woman raise herself on her arms, saw her face working until her comeliness had turned to gargoyle ugliness, and she was gasping for breath, her breast rising and falling as if there was tumult within her.

"*All right!" she screamed. "He did know Storr. He knew Storr, he hated Storr, he—was blackmailed by Storr.*"

"*What did Storr make him do?*"

"*He made him … he made him …" she broke off, and now her body was heaving and arching and there was streaming sweat on her forehead and on her lips.*

"*Did he know what Storr was doing?" asked Crabtree, and he turned to Palfrey and said in an anguished voice. "I can't go on, if I do she will die.*"

Now, the sound of harsh and agonised breathing was coming through the microphone, magnified to such an extent that it seemed as if Grace were breathing into Palfrey's ear.

"Sap, I have to tell you this," Stefan said with great precision. "The support from the Kremlin will be on the one condition: that Professor Storr is apprehended and questioned at once."

Palfrey wiped his own wet forehead with the back of his hand, staring at the woman who seemed to be in some tormenting purgatory, body still convulsed, one hand in front of her eyes as if to shut out some demoniac vision, one arm stretched outwards towards the window in terrible accusation.

"No." Palfrey made himself say.

"Sap—"

"No," repeated Palfrey. "Our one hope is to find out where Storr goes."

"The Soviet Government—"

"The Soviet Government has subscribed to the constitution of Z5—that the organisation's actions, policy and methods shall not be influenced by any member State. Remind them."

"I have reminded them! Sap—"

"*He wouldn't tell me. He was terrified of Storr, he wouldn't let me know what he was doing. He only pretended to write, I knew he was doing some other work for Storr, I tell you I don't know what it was.*"

Palfrey said: "Hold on, Stefan. I may be some time. I'm going to talk to the woman. Have you got the amplifiers fully extended?"

"Yes."

"Ask your friends to listen," Palfrey said. He moved to Crabtree, who was almost crying, and took his place at the microphone. "*Grace,*" *he said,* "*listen to me.*"

She was throwing herself about as if possessed by demons.

"*Geoffrey would want you to tell me,*" *Palfrey said.*

"*No, no! He said I must never tell anyone.*"

"*Grace, listen to me. Was Geoffrey loyal to his country?*"

"*Of course he was, he loved England!*"

"*Was he loyal?*"

"*Yes!*" *she screamed.*

"*Then he would want to help England now.*"

"*He wasn't a traitor, he wasn't a traitor.*"

"*Then what was Storr making him do?*"

"*He wasn't a traitor!*"

"*Did he ever go anywhere with Storr?*"

"*No, no, he didn't.*"

"*Did he talk to you about Storr?*"

"*No, no, no!*"

"*Did he ever talk about any other place than Sane?*"

"*No,he—*"

"*Grace, listen to me. Geoffrey is dead. You know he's dead.*"

"*Oh, God, God, God,*" *she moaned.*

"Please," muttered Crabtree. "Please don't—"

"*Perhaps he died for England.*"

"*He loved England, he hated Storr.*"

"*Did he ever go away with Storr?*"

"*No.*"

"*Was Storr the leader?*"

"*He—he didn't know. He thought there were others, there—*" she broke off, and her breathing eased. She sank back on her pillows, and the agony of her body seemed to quieten. "*He—thought—there—were—others?*" Now, despite the amplification, the words were hardly audible.

"*Were they American?*" Palfrey asked.

"*I—I think so.*"

"*Did they come from any particular place?*"

"*America,*" she said, in a clear, still voice. "*Geoffrey went there, ten years*

ago. That is when it began. He was working at Yellowstone. Yellowstone. He was working on the hot springs. Wonderful. He told me how wonderful. Geysers—everywhere. Beautiful. He loved it there. We were going to move there. And then —Storr. Storr came to see him. He knew Storr in Yellowstone. At first they were friends. Friends. Storr. Hated Storr. He hated Storr." There was a moment of silence and the fury returned to her face and her body and she began to hurl herself about the bed, beating her breasts, tearing off her clothes, screaming, screaming. And words gradually formed themselves in that awful sound, three words which came over and over and over again. "*Storr killed him … Storr killed him … Storr killed him.*"

And then, with awful clarity, she went on: "*And he killed my children. I hate him. I hate him.*"

Then, she collapsed, on her back, her mouth wide open and her eyes staring, sightlessly. Almost at once the door opened, and Dr. Marak and a nurse came in. Crabtree moved away from Palfrey as if from someone unclean.

"Well," Palfrey asked roughly into the telephone. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," answered Stefan. "The Presidium has withdrawn the condition, and we may proceed."

Palfrey wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"As soon as we know Storr's destination, you and I must meet there," he said.

"I shall be ready to fly anywhere in the world," said Stefan. "And at any time."

Chapter Thirteen

Take-Off

Palfrey put back the telephone and turned aside as the two doctors eased Grace Drummond's body into a more natural posture. *Natural?* It was almost as if she were dead. Palfrey went along to the elevator and to his own room. Joyce was at a filing cabinet.

She looked at his ravaged face, and then away again.

"Shall I leave you for a while?" she asked.

"No, please stay. Did you hear Stefan?"

"Yes."

"Conditions," Palfrey said heavily.

"At least they withdrew."

"Once they knew that Yellowstone—" Palfrey broke off. "Get me some tea, will you, and a snack."

"Yes. Sap—"

"Yes?"

"Please get some sleep."

"I'll get some sleep," he said bitterly. "Sometimes I almost hate—" he broke off, meeting her look of distress and pleading. He knew how much she loved him, and at moments of realisation he was touched with humility. "I know," he went on. "One woman—and perhaps millions of people. A village or a town wiped out and you feel nothing, and one woman—"

"She may recover," Joyce said. "They'll do all they can."

"Yes. Has Storr's plane taken off yet?"

"It was taxiing to the runway a few minutes ago."

Joyce did what she so rarely did, these days, and took Palfrey's hands and drew him towards her, and for a moment they looked like lovers. Then he kissed her forehead, and she moved away.

Soon, she was back with tea and bacon and eggs, bread and butter – and on the tray was a card. It was headed: Prof. Stephen Storr

B.S.T., P.M.
5.41 Left Winchester.
6.09 Turn-off at Cadnam Roundabout.
6.13 Car turned off near Rufus Stone, New Forest.

There were other details, and then:

11.03 Boarded *BO.* 707. Shannon Airport.
11.09 Started take-off run.
11.12 Airborne.
11.15 Aircraft over Atlantic, normal northern route.
11.20 Aircraft maintaining normal altitude (32,000 feet), speed

and direction.

There would be more reports, every five minutes or so, the normal flight contact first with Ireland, then with Gander, then with New York. Unless there were trouble during the flight Palfrey would not be informed of its progress until it was about to land at Kennedy Airport – in approximately seven hours' time. That would be about six o'clock British Standard Time, two o'clock Eastern Standard Time in the U.S.A.

He put the card aside, and discovered another beneath it. This ran:

Mountview (City of), Wyoming, U.S.A.

Mountain Time U.S.A.
2.00 p.m. (B.S.T. 11.00 p.m.)

The latest figures following the release of carbon monoxide and smog show 1957 dead, 101 seriously affected. The whole city has been evacuated and military gas decontamination squads have taken over. Source of the gas now established as the local natural gas plant which supplies most of the city with normal domestic and industrial gas. Source of natural gas: a field in Montana, forty-five miles north of Mountview.

Military and civil authorities are checking.

2.40 p.m. M.T. Death roll now 1,996.

Now known that the distribution plant was fed with the carbon monoxide and smog through one of its main supply lines. It is a petroleum oil-driven plant. Contamination now ceased. All gas supplies to the city of Mountview and to all cities on the same pipe line discontinued for the time being.

Palfrey put this card aside, and, almost absent-mindedly, ate and drank. He had nearly finished when he pushed his chair back and went across to the telephone and dialled the hospital.

"Dr. Crabtree?" he asked when a man answered.

"I can get him," the man said.

"Is that Dr. Marak?"

"Yes, sir."

"How is Mrs. Drummond?"

"She is surviving, sir."

"Is there any indication of brain damage?"

"Not at this stage, sir. Do you wish to be informed at every development?"

Palfrey said: "I'll check from time to time. Where is Dr. Crabtree?"

"I persuaded him to take some rest, sir. I—" Marak hesitated.

"Go on," said Palfrey.

"I should report, sir, that Dr. Crabtree is in deteriorating health."

"You mean, you think he needs a long rest?"

"A very long one, sir. And he will not apply for leave."

"I'll make some arrangements," Palfrey promised.

"Thank you, sir. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Palfrey put up the receiver and went back to his tray. He finished another cup of tea and then went to the door leading to Joyce's office. She was at her desk, working; she was always working.

"Sauce for the goose," Palfrey said.

She looked up. Her dark hair was loose and very thick about her neck. For a moment he was startled by her attractiveness.

"*What* did you say?"

"I said you need some sleep, too."

"I'm going to bed soon," she assured him, "after I've seen you take a sleeping pill." When he hesitated, she went on almost sharply: "Sap, you haven't really slept for three nights."

"I'll be good," he promised.

She stood over him, twenty minutes later, as he sat on the side of his bed in a small room furnished with a few items of contemporary furniture in dark wood, sleeping pill in one hand, glass of milk in the other. She was in a dressing-gown with a high neck, and her hair fell to her shoulders. He was aware of her, not as his brisk and efficient secretary, but as an attractive woman.

"Sap," she said in a husky voice, "you try yourself too much."

"I know," he said. "I'm not human. If I were, I couldn't resist you." He put his hands out to her. "Joyce, my dear, don't hate me."

"Oh, you fool," she said. "You fool!"

"I'm all of that," he said wryly, "and more, much more."

Two minutes later he was in bed, and she was closing the door on him. There was a very faint light from a window which seemed to be open to the night air. The simulation was so good that there even seemed to be a soft breeze blowing across his forehead, and across his vision of Joyce, and of Grace Drummond. Tantalisingly they were both just out of his reach, and do what he would, they eluded him.

Soon he slept.

In a nearby room, not unlike his, Joyce lay drowsily awake. On the dressing-table there was a photograph of Palfrey, one he had signed for her when she had first come to work for him, nearly fifteen years ago.

She fell asleep, before long.

The night staff at Z5 were awake, keeping track of events round the world.

In Moscow, Stefan Andromovitch slept while his branch office of Z5 was in constant touch with London.

In the aircraft, now nearing the point of no return in mid-Atlantic, Costain slept, and in the seat next to him Marion Kemble dozed. In front of

them, Griselda and Professor Storr slept; across the gangway, young Philip was next to Arthur Harrison. Philip slept soundly, but Harrison was awake.

At seven o'clock, Palfrey was awakened by one of the domestic staff, with tea. On his tray were several reports and the one he seized with great alacrity was the one marked: *Professor Stephen Storr.* There was a kind of running commentary starting an hour before.

> Aircraft preparing to land … Pilot given his landing beam … Aircraft losing height … Aircraft circling Long Island, Kennedy Airport in sight … Aircraft about to land … Perfect landing .. . Aircraft taxiing to Gate 17 … Passengers disembarking … Prof. Storr and party at immigration desk … Party at Customs … Professor Storr met by a woman who had been at the airport for two hours … Obviously the couple are on affectionate terms.

Palfrey poured out tea and read with almost frantic haste, turned the card and found it blank. He was about to call the Operations Room when another man appeared at his door, the bright-faced youth he had seen the previous night and who had told him about young Hill.

"Good morning, sir. Am I too early?"

"Come in." Palfrey waited only for the door to close. "What is it?"

"Professor Storr and his party, sir."

Palfrey could hardly keep the tea-cup steady in his hand.

"Yes."

"The whole party has taken off from Kennedy in a privately-owned Conquistador aircraft, a twin-engined jet with pilot and engineer aboard."

"*All* six passengers?" echoed Palfrey.

"Yes, sir, and Costain appears to be very friendly with one of the women —Marion Kemble."

"Are they being followed?"

"Of course, sir. And they are heading due west."

"Due west," Palfrey echoed, and he felt a strange easing of his panic, near satisfaction as he thought: Towards Yellowstone. "Good," he said aloud. "What else has come in during the night?"

"Seventy-nine governments have already accepted the recommendations about a close investigation into the higher concentration of smog, sir—the only major power which has not yet accepted is Japan."

"*China* has accepted."

"She was among the first, sir."

"Good. What else?"

"The whole of the area in the region of Sane Village is cleared, sir. The centre of the explosion was the cellar at Sane Manor. The one survivor is improving, and has made a report. The valley has been declared a danger area and is being guarded by further detachments from Fulton. Is there any other report you would like before I go off duty?"

Palfrey said at once: “Mountview.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir. The death roll is now nearly 2,050. It has been declared a danger and a disaster area, also. The supplies of natural gas have been restored to other cities in Wyoming and Montana. No other outbreaks have been reported. The whole area is being reconnoitred.”

“Good,” said Palfrey. “That’s all I need. Unless—”

The eager eyes were so tired now.

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you heard how Mrs. Drummond is?”

“Who, sir? Oh—the woman who was in the hospital last night. No sir, I have only the outside report. I can find out, sir.”

“You get off,” Palfrey said. “And thanks. And make sure you sleep.”

“No need at all to fear I won’t, sir!”

“Good,” said Palfrey, and thought: “Oh to be young and carefree!”

He got up as soon as the door closed on the other, and then called the hospital. He recognised Marak at once; didn’t the man ever rest? He hesitated before he spoke, almost afraid of what he would hear. Then: “This is Dr. Palfrey,” he stated simply.

“Good morning, sir,” Marak said with a much lighter note in his voice. “I have good news of Mrs. Drummond. She has responded to the shock therapy extremely well, her pulse and respiration are nearly normal. She should recover completely.”

“Wonderful!” said Palfrey fervently. “Wonderful.”

He was in his bath a few minutes later wondering where the Conquistador aircraft was, and how well David Costain knew Marion Kemble. He needed reports on Costain soon – and he could hardly wait for news of the aircraft’s landing.

Part II

The Source

Chapter Fourteen

The Landing

David Costain felt the touch of Marion's hand on his, and became absolutely and compellingly aware of her. He had felt drawn to her from the first few moments of meeting; then, he was so absorbed in what Palfrey had been saying, and of the disaster, he had lost the acuteness of that attraction. But after they had last seen Palfrey he had been alone with her for a few moments in his room at the Winchester Hotel.

And he had become overpoweringly alive to her presence, her nearness.

She had come in with a message from Storr; and he had not answered, had simply stared at her.

"David," she had said, softly, "did you hear me?"

Not trusting his voice, he nodded.

"Then would you like to come?"

"In one way—very much."

"And in other ways, no."

"Marion—" he had begun, and then stopped, tongue-tied.

"David—what is it?"

A shaft of sunlight struck across her hair, burnishing it to a rich colour. The colour of her eyes he could see was a deep blue. It was the first time he had been able to study her closely, and she faced and returned this scrutiny with disconcerting directness. He was so aware of the delicate arching of her brows and nose, the short upper lip with the clearly marked groove, the full lips, the square chin. She had a full neck, too, not slender like Griselda's. There was sturdiness and strength in her, and he was acutely conscious of the swell of her bosom beneath the pale brown jumper which stretched – but not tightly – over her chest.

He did not know how long they stood like that, but the spell was broken by Philip, calling out in a petulant voice: "Are we going to eat, or aren't we?"

Marion had stirred.

"I must go and tell Stephen what you decide to do," she said. "Do you want to come with us to Bournemouth? Will you work with us?"

At the back of his mind there had been a hazy recollection of Palfrey's instructions: and how exactly this was what Palfrey would have wanted.

"Marion," he had muttered, "I could so easily—make a fool of myself."

"I don't understand, David."

"Over you," he had explained.

She could have responded with lightness and evasion. Instead, she answered him seriously.

"You've lived alone for so long."

"Too long. But—"

"So have I," she had told him smiling faintly. "Come with us, David."

A dozen thoughts had crowded his mind, about the fact that he had given an undertaking to Palfrey, that he would not really be honest with her or with Storr. Of the morning, only yesterday, when he had seen her at the window. Of the rumours – that both she and Griselda were Storr's mistresses. There was such confusion in his mind.

"*Are we going down to dinner or not?*" Philip had cried out, angrily.

And David Costain had said: "Yes, I'll come with you, if—" he could hardly believe, thinking back, that he had actually put his thoughts, his feelings, into words "—if you understand that you set my blood on fire."

And for a moment, an answering fire seemed to flare in her eyes.

Now, unbelievably, they were sitting together in an aircraft flying somewhere over North America. There was no moon, and the stars were very bright, for only one or two pale lights were on in the cabin. Now, Storr was somewhere behind with a friend whom he had introduced at New York airport as Mrs. Constance Mann, a tall and very attractive woman. Except for the droning of the jet engines and an occasional snore from Harrison, there was no sound.

And Marion was so close to him, sleeping.

Two or three recollections flitted through his mind: of Storr at the hotel, saying that he had decided to fly to America and not settle in Bournemouth – would he, Costain, care to come?

"But why me, Professor?"

"I think you will be an asset."

"I don't understand," Costain had protested.

"Must you understand everything? We shall fly tonight, all arrangements have been made. Will you come?"

He had nothing, absolutely nothing, to leave behind; no man could be more free. Helplessly, he had asked again the one question for which he could see no answer.

"But why me, Professor?"

"If you must have a reason, I have a sense of a common bond. We were both closely associated with the Sane disaster."

There must be another reason, of course, a strong and compelling one, but Storr was certainly not going to divulge it. Costain had to accept unquestioningly – and if *he* needed a reason, there was Marion.

"I still don't understand, but I would like to come."

"I am very glad," Storr had said. "You won't regret it, I promise you."

By his side, there had seemed to be almost a reflection, not of himself but of Palfrey. This was what Palfrey would have wanted, he could almost see the faint smile of approval on his face.

At Kennedy Airport the party had been separated; the men sent to one of the conveyor belt platforms, Griselda and Marion to another. Costain could recall looking across at them, Marion sturdy and firmly set, Griselda taller, more slender and, in an aquiline way, quite beautiful.

A coloured Customs Officer was on the other side of the belt on which his one case stood.

"Is this all the baggage you have, sir?"

"Everything, yes. I came away in a hurry."

"So it seems, sir." The man had smiled, obviously amused, then bent forward and rummaged through the case. "Don't show any surprise," he had said, and Costain had in fact stiffened. "I work for Dr. Palfrey."

"Good God!" Costain had felt as if he were knifed.

"Yes, sir. I am going to put two telephone numbers inside your case—learn them off by heart, and call either if you want to talk to Palfrey or send a message."

It was as unbelievable as the rest, yet strangely reassuring.

"I will."

"Have you any knowledge of your destination?" The slip of paper was safely slipped inside a folded shirt.

"The mountain states," Costain had said.

"Hasn't Storr been more specific?"

"Not yet."

"It is vital to know your destination as early as possible."

"I will send word as soon as I know."

"Good. That's all, sir."

"Thank you," Costain had said. "Tell Palfrey I am as puzzled as he must be."

"Sure will, sir. In that packet is an American Express Credit Card—sign it so that you will be able to get money so that you can be independent of Storr if you have to escape."

"Very well."

"Be careful, sir."

"As careful as I can," Costain had promised. "Just as careful as I can."

At the end of the platform, Arthur Harrison and Philip had been waiting, Philip in an invalid chair, glowering.

"They kept you a hell of a time. Trying to smuggle pot in or something?"

"They certainly intended to make sure," Costain answered good humouredly. "Too little luggage seems to alert their attention even more than too much."

Philip dismissed the subject with a grunt as Marion approached. She held a newspaper in her hand, and by her manner and the way she walked it was easy to see that she was badly shaken. Only a few feet away, she lowered the paper, and without a word, held it so that all three could read. It was the *New York Times* with an enormous headline:

WYOMING CITY WIPED OUT BY SMOG.

By Costain's side was the newspaper, with the whole hideous story, backed up by the added horror of graphic photography. Even now, Costain could hardly believe that what had happened at Sane had been repeated here in one of the mountain states to which they were flying. He could recall the shock on the faces of young Philip and Harrison, knew that in their way they were as shaken as Marion had been.

But they had said little.

Storr had hardly spoken, and Griselda had made no comment at all. Costain had fought with himself. He had to talk, at least to ask some questions; if he simply accepted this as a coincidence they would have known him a rogue or a fool. So he had asked Storr to talk to him in private, away from the others.

"Of course, David, but we haven't long." Storr had drawn him aside.

"Professor, are we heading for Wyoming?"

"Yes, we are."

"You know what happened to the city of Mountview?"

"Yes," Storr had answered, "that is why we are flying there."

"You mean you knew it was happening before we left England?"

"I was told that it might happen."

"So—you are involved with this—mass murder," Costain had said in a voice so tense he hardly recognised it as his own.

"In a way, yes," Storr had admitted, tonelessly.

"Will you now tell me *why* you asked me to come with you?"

Storr looked at him levelly. "You are an agriculturalist with an engineering background. You are also the one man available with such a background who had the personal experience of being present directly after the Sane disaster. I believe you might be helpful if there were another outbreak, and I had secret information which told me where it might come."

"Did you warn the authorities?"

Storr had hesitated, and then said with quiet emphasis: "The authorities seldom take any notice of such warnings, David. You should know that." He glanced away and Costain was aware of a movement out of the corner of his eye. Constance Mann, moving towards them. "David," Storr had confirmed, "you are under no compulsion to come with us, but I hope you will." Then the woman had come close and he had turned and smiled at her. "Constance, my dear, I don't think you have met David Costain, a friend of Marion's."

No one could have failed to be impressed by the striking good looks of this woman, or her affection for Stephen Storr.

Costain had had only a few minutes in which to decide what to do.

Even at this minute, he could not be absolutely sure why he continued with them, whether because of Marion, or whether because of Palfrey and

the belief that the further he went with Storr's entourage the more he would learn.

Now, it was dark and, the engine noises apart, quiet in the cabin. Comforted by the knowledge that Marion was lying closely and warmly beside him, he dozed off, quickly awaking to the touch of someone shaking him lightly by the shoulder.

"Good morning, sir," a girl was saying. "Good morning, sir."

He felt Marion stir.

"Oh. *David*" she exclaimed.

"Good morning, madam. We shall be landing in twenty minutes. Would you like some coffee now?"

Marion was clutching his hand, as if unbelievingly.

"Please," said Costain. "For two."

"Do you take sugar and cream?"

"Just a little cream."

"I understand, sir. Miss Kemble?"

"Black, without sugar," Marion said. She turned to smile at Costain as the girl went off. "Did you sleep?"

"A little."

"I didn't expect to sleep at all," Marion admitted. She looked at the others, stirring to wakefulness, and then out at the starlit night. "Of course we've crossed two time zones. Or is it three? It's early morning there, anyway." The stewardess brought the coffee, and David drank it eagerly and was glad of another cup.

Two minutes later, he was unconscious, absolutely dead to the world: and Marion sat on the edge of her seat and looked at him for a few moments, a strange expression in her eyes. Then she pushed past him to the gangway, touching his cheek gently with the tips of her fingers as she passed.

Chapter Fifteen

The Chalet

When he came round, it was broad daylight, and he was in a small room alone. His head was clear but his mouth was dry and he felt a sharp awareness of hunger. He did not get up immediately but lay on his back, looking at a ceiling made of timbers, a rich red brown in colour, fastened with wooden cleats in place of nails.

It was very still and silent.

There were two windows, one of them with curtains drawn. Another, higher up in the wall, let in shafts of sunlight. The walls were of rough-hewn wood, the same tone as the ceiling. So was the door, which, without lock or key, had a bar and slot fastening. The furniture was rough-hewn, too, with decorative panels depicting Indians in feathered headdress. On one wall was a long picture in soft colours of a meeting between white men and Indians; obviously a peaceful meeting with none of the usual emphasis on violence, resentment, suspicion or hatred.

He pushed back the loosely woven blanket, and got out of bed. He saw that he was wearing a white singlet and underpants, but nothing else. So someone had undressed him.

Now, he admitted what he had known from the moment of waking, that he had been drugged on board the aircraft, and brought off so that he could have no idea where he was, could not report to Palfrey. And this could only mean that he was under some kind of suspicion.

Marion must have known.

He walked across to the window where the curtains were drawn; the other was too high for him to look out. On the far side of the cupboard was a chair he hadn't noticed before; his suit was folded over this – with shirt, socks and shoes close by. A cursory search revealed his case, placed neatly in the cupboard. He opened the case and saw the book which the customs officer had put in. Anxiously he slipped a hand beneath a couple of shirts; then sighed with relief. The American Express Credit Card was still there, and the telephone numbers were roughly pencilled in the back of the book, as if they were some code number for the bookshop purposes. He studied the numbers:

201 : 457 : 8010
101 : 754 : 1080

He repeated them over and over but did not attempt to erase them; it would be a long time before he knew them off by heart.

At least, no one had taken the book away.

He crossed to the window, and attempted to pull back the curtains. The rings were too tight on the poles for easy running, but suddenly they gave

way and he could see.

The sight before his eyes made him gasp with astonishment. He gazed, wide-eyed, in fascination. He had never seen such awesome beauty, such grandeur. There, against sharp-peaked mountains which seemed to curve great segments out of the deep blue sky, was a lake of blue as dazzling as the sky; and about the shores of the lake were rocks, and small trees growing close to the water's edge, reflected in the water. There were clearings, like meadows, in the mountainsides; there were dark fir trees, in massed array with pale green trees of a different kind laced between them.

And atop each of the mountains there was snow, lying like silver beneath the sun.

Costain stood there, marvelling, slowly taking stock.

This house, or chalet, was perhaps a thousand feet above the lake, and a glance on either side showed that it must also be set in the slopes of a mountain. There was a patch of pale green trees just below the window, and winding paths, of stone, leading towards a clearing where there were white-painted chairs and tables, a big garden umbrella, a hammock and some stools. The path led on, out of sight, presumably to a landing stage against which two canoes and a dinghy were moored; he could only see the end of the jetty, could not see the land from which it jutted.

He could see, built out into the lake, a small swimming pool.

At last, he turned away, and went to the door. He held his breath, not sure what he would find.

The room or hall beyond was empty, the three doors leading from it closed.

He called: "Anyone home?"

There was no answer.

He opened the nearest door, and found a bathroom, with shower, tub and water closet, piles of towels, packets of soap, paper cups and boxes of tissues. Against one wall was a little boiling plate, a glass or plastic jug, some packets of tea, coffee, powdered milk and plastic spoons. On the wall was a small plaque, saying: "*Fill jug to line clearly marked and place on ring. Boiling water in minutes.*" He ran hot water, and followed the instructions; he felt that he could face anything when he had had some tea; he had never known his mouth so dry.

Was that from the drug?

He opened the other doors, to find one more bedroom with a bathroom leading off, and a big living room with a patio beyond a glass wall. It had a different view of the lake and the mountains but was just as breathtaking. He stood out against a wooden rail. This patio appeared to be built on stilts which rose straight from the mountain side, and from the rail there was a sheer drop down to half-hidden rocks and stunted trees; a fall from here would mean almost instant death. There was a clearing, down which a body could fall straight into the waters of the lake.

He turned towards the right, and saw the long valley with its steep sides. Steam was rising from a dozen, a hundred fissures. *Steam – or smoke?*

There, strangely tranquil, unbelievably beautiful, was a scene which reminded him vividly of the terrible happening at Sane Manor. Was that horror to be repeated?

The whole valley seemed to be filled with vapour; surely it was steam.

But no smell reached him, nothing to suggest that these fumes were poisonous.

He went back to the bathroom, and opened the packet of tea, surprised to find that it was powdered. Carefully he read the packet again.

"*Place a level spoonful in the cup provided and pour on boiling water. Milk and sugar to taste. For iced tea—*"

He followed the instructions precisely, added powdered milk, stirred and tasted. It wasn't bad. He carried the cup to the patio and sat down, hitching his chair in a position that allowed him to see over the vapour-filled valley. Incredulous, he closed his eyes as if to shut out a vision. Now he was aware of a faint odour of sulphur.

The tea was not just passable, it was good.

He drank it with growing enjoyment as he looked over the valley and watched the rising clouds.

Was it steam? Or smoke? Or gas?

He recalled some of the things he had read of Yellowstone National Park, in this part of the United States: the hot springs, the sulphur springs, the geysers. And then he saw a sudden fountain of water, in the valley. He held his breath as a great geyser erupted, not a mile away from where he sat. And he could hear the roar, see the water cascading where the sun caught it, the steam – it must be steam – blowing away from the actual eruption, which was why he could see it so clearly.

The sound slackened into a faint hiss. The fountain gradually grew smaller until after a while it was only a little spurting, close to the valley side from which it had sprung. Then, as he was held as if by a mesmeric force, another, greater spout of water rose further along the valley, towering hundreds of feet into the air.

Soon, this also died away, and there was only the valley, with steam rising in so many places, from the bottom and along either side. He began to count the clouds of steam.

"… eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen …"

He counted up to twenty-one and then gave up; there were too many small ones which grew in size, fell, and rose again. There must be at least a hundred different cracks and fissures – *blow-holes,* that was the word – which filled the valley with the vapour.

And it was a harmless vapour, for he saw two bears, black and big even from here, moving about in a patch of steam. He held his breath and watched more closely, then spotted some deer, half a dozen – no, twenty or thirty or more – in a clearing in the valley, emerging from patches of steam and obviously not affected. So there was life, not death, in this valley of such all-transcending beauty.

He sat enthralled, thought drawn out of him, even the awful vision of

Sane, dead, drawn from his mind, until he heard a movement behind him. He did not turn at once, but sat very still. The sound was repeated, a creak as of footsteps, so at last he turned.

Marion was in the open space between the living room and the patio.

She wore jeans, and a rust-coloured shirt. There was something different about her, as if she belonged here, rather than in the places where he had seen her before. There was a golden glow to her complexion, a fresh lissomness about her movements as she came towards him.

He did not move.

She stepped onto the patio, looking at him intently. He wondered how far away she would be when she began to speak, for she would have to begin, there was no other way. He had little feeling at first, not even disgust at being betrayed, but as she drew nearer, his heart began to beat faster. She did not smile but her lips were parted just enough to show a glint of teeth.

She was almost within arm's reach; when would she stop?

She took two steps forward and stood over him, so that he had to lean back in order to see her clearly, and now his heart was pounding, yet still he did not speak. And nor did she.

She bent down.

He knew what she was going to do and sat there like a stone with his heart hammering within him. Her face was close to his, then closer, until she kissed him.

He knew, then, that he was as ready to receive as she to give. He felt her breath and then the gentle pressure, then the greater pressure, even the touch of her teeth. He wanted to fling her away but he could not; he wanted to put his arms about her and bring her down to him, but he would not.

At last, she drew away.

"I didn't think any man's blood could run so cold," she said.

"I didn't think any woman would feel so sure she could seduce any man she pleased," he retorted.

She echoed: "Seduce?"

"Wasn't that a lesson in seduction?"

"No," she said very simply. "It was an expression of love."

It was his turn to echo: "Love?"

"David," she said, "I know there is no sense in it and I don't understand myself, but I love you."

It was on the tip of his tongue to hurl the word back at her, sneeringly, but he did not, because her eyes told him what he wanted to believe but what was madness to believe – that what she said was true. He could see the way her breast rose and fell as if her heart was hammering with the same near sickening force as his.

He said breathlessly: "Where am I? And why am I here and why did you persuade me to come with you?"

"Do you usually blame others for what you do of your own free will?" she asked.

"Free will? Or not so free?" He shrugged. "At least you can tell me where

I am."

"You are in a valley between Yellowstone Park and the Grand Tetons," she answered. "On Stephen's land."

"You mean he owns this valley?"

"And the lake and the mountains as far as you can see," she told him.

"And the hot springs and the geysers?"

"Everything," she said.

"As he owned Sane Manor?" Costain demanded.

"Yes."

"And owns the killer-smog?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, then moved towards the rail and stared out at the valley. Costain did not move, but he began to be aware of living. Of his undervest and pants, for instance, and a faint satisfaction that at least he had no spare flesh and plenty of well-developed muscle on thighs and calves and shoulders. He was aware, less happily, that he hadn't shaved.

"David," she said. "Stephen Storr is a very good man and a very great man."

He said freezingly: "And no doubt a humanitarian, as well."

"David," she said again, uttering his name in a way he had never heard before, "don't pre-judge Stephen. Don't pre-judge anything or anyone—not even me. He will be here to see you soon, and he'll need your help. You may be the only man alive who can help him. And you may be the only man alive who can hope—really hope—to save the world from utter disaster."

"Don't pre-judge him," echoed in his ears, "… not even me."

"Don't resist him for the sake of resistance or because of resentment or because he may have injured your pride," she went on. "Please don't, I beg of you."

On the last words she turned to face him, and there was a look of intense entreaty in her eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

The Confrontation

There was a long silence which might have been drawn from the valley. Marion was outlined against the rising vapour, which cast a dream-like quality on her hair and her features and the appeal of her expression. He felt a tremendous attraction for her, would have given a great deal to move towards her; but he stayed where he was.

"If I resist him," he said, "it will be because of what he says or wants me to do."

"That's all I ask," Marion said.

"Is it?" he demanded, roughly. "Don't you want me to do whatever he asks, whatever it is?"

"I hope you will," she said. "But most of all I hope—" She broke off, and seemed suddenly unable to meet his eyes. For the first time he saw her in full profile, head tilted backwards, chin and bosom thrusting and proud. In the back of his mind there was the understanding that the shock of what had happened, acting as a catalyst, had broken down the icy resistance he had created within himself for so long. All his repressed desires, his secret longings, his sense of unfulfilment, had been released, and were now at the mercy of this girl.

His voice was hoarse when he said: "Well—what do you hope most of all?"

After a short pause, she answered: "That whatever you think you should do, you will do."

He believed her; he did not think it possible that she could speak in such a way and look up there to the high peaks, and lie to him.

"How much can you tell me?"

"Nothing more," she replied.

"But you've told me nothing."

"I've told you how far-reaching your help can be, and that he will soon be here to talk to you. And I've told you—" she broke off again, and this time turned to look at him. "And I've told you that I love you."

"It doesn't seem—possible."

"Well, it's happened." She moved a step towards him.

"Stay there," he said roughly.

She stood absolutely still, waiting for him.

"I don't trust my feelings," he said.

"They are the only things to trust."

"Well, I don't trust mine."

"You've fought against emotion, fought against your instincts far too long," she asserted.

"What do you know of me?" he asked, coldly.

"Everything that one can find out," she answered. "I can at least tell you

this: Stephen—all of us—have been watching you for some time. We know about what happened ten years ago. We know about your yearly pilgrimage. We know—"

"Why the devil should you pry into my affairs?" he cried.

Then he heard another sound, broke off and spun round – and saw Professor Storr within earshot. And just as with Marion, the surroundings seemed to have changed Storr. He fitted in, as he had never done in England. Relaxed and composed, he came forward smiling pleasantly.

"Because I wanted to know whether you could be trusted." Something about the way he said that told Costain that he was not sure even yet, but that his, Costain's, answer would decide him. Professor Storr added gently: "How long have you worked for Dr. Palfrey and Z5, David?"

The impact of the question was so sharp that it had an almost physical effect. Costain was astounded by the question and the knowledge behind it, astonished by the complete nonchalance with which Storr spoke. It was almost as if he had been struck a stunning blow which left him dizzy and bemused.

"Sit down," Storr said, and pulled up a cane chair; pushing it forward. "Careful—it's a rocker."

Costain sat down slowly. Storr leaned against the rail, and Costain thought suddenly how easy it would be to lean forward and push him over. No one could fall from there except to his death.

"Well—how long have you worked for Palfrey?" Storr repeated.

Costain sought frantically for some way out, some loophole. What could he do but tell the truth? If he lied, then the other man might believe that he had been spying on him, watching, for a long time. He could picture Marion, see the pleading in her eyes, her longing for his trust. The truth was that he could get nowhere by lying.

He answered quietly: "Forty-eight hours."

"You mean from the time you met in Winchester?"

"Yes."

"But Palfrey's organisation never uses anyone who is not thoroughly screened and trained," Storr stated flatly.

"You of all people should know how easy it is to screen a stranger," Costain said bitterly, and glanced round to make sure that Marion felt the sharpness of the retort. But Marion wasn't there. During those moments of shock, she must have slipped away. "As for trained—Palfrey appeared to think I could do all that was needed."

"And what was needed?"

"To find out what you were doing, with whom you were associated, anything about you."

"And how were you to report to him?"

"I had to telephone the London Headquarters of Z5."

"As simple as that," Storr said musingly. "Yes, it could be. Did he tell you why he was so interested in me?"

"He thought you might be responsible for the sudden concentrations of smog."

"Did he say whether he had been watching me over any period of time?"

"On the contrary, he said that he had become interested simply because of the smog at Sane. The fact that you had survived—" Costain broke into a smile – "the fact that I had survived and Mrs. Drummond, too, made us all suspect. I satisfied him that I had been in London simply by chance."

"Yes," said Storr. "The pilgrimage."

"Why were you so interested in me?" demanded Costain. "Why did you take the trouble to find out so much about me?"

Storr hesitated, weighing his words. A bird flashed past the patio, a startling electric blue. He glanced towards it, still without answering. Then he said: "For two reasons. First, I thought you might be an agent."

"*Palfrey's?*"

"Anyone's," said Storr.

"Watching *you?* But I was at Sane years before you!"

"Yes. But not before Drummond."

"You mean *he* was working with you?"

"Yes. He was experimenting on this project for a long time before we moved to Sane."

"On—smog."

"Yes," repeated Storr. He paused, and Costain had a distinct impression that he was making up his mind how much to say. "On smog, and natural gas."

"But there was no natural gas at Sane."

"Wasn't there?" asked Storr, smiling faintly. "Isn't there?"

"You mean—there *is?*"

"I have always been convinced that there were deep reservoirs of natural gas, if not of oil, in parts of the world where it wasn't suspected, and where it could have enormous economic value. One of my main activities—perhaps my main one—has been to search for such places. I have great wealth, David. I am one of the richest men in the world. And I have both an urge to make more and more money, and a compulsion to use it for the good of mankind."

He stopped, smiling very faintly, and when Costain made no immediate response, he asked: "Do you find that hard to believe?"

"Let's say I haven't found much evidence of it yet," Costain retorted. "If Sane is an example—"

"Sane," said Storr, "and Mountview."

"*You* caused that."

"Yes," Storr admitted, but his smile had faded. There was a strange expression in his eyes, a touch of what might easily be called horror – as if he were seeing unspeakable things. "Yes," he repeated, "I caused both disasters."

"For the good of mankind," Costain said bitterly.

"And I am likely to cause many more," Storr went on as if he had not

heard the interruption. “Many thousands more, and worse by far than any that have yet taken place. So far, only small places have been affected. If a large city such as London or New York were to be polluted, then—” he broke off, and now there was no doubt of the pain in his eyes.

“You mean, they *can* be?”

“Yes,” said Storr simply.

“And you can cause such horror?” Costain felt sick; felt his nerves beginning to quiver in hatred for this man.

Storr turned to face him, and still leaned against the rail, arms spread, gripping the wood on either side. Costain found himself breathing hard, as if from some great exertion; and he felt drawn to rush forward and to push this monster down into the valley.

“David,” Storr said, “it could happen anywhere in the world. In any city and town, at almost any time.”

“Then for God’s sake, stop it!”

“I can’t stop it,” Storr told him very quietly. “I have been trying to for a year, ever since I began to see what had happened, and what would happen everywhere. I caught a tiger,” he added in a voice which Costain could hardly hear, “and I let it escape.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” growled Costain.

“I am talking about a discovery which I made and which I sold to every motorcar manufacturer, every industrialist, every utility-works in the world. It is a substance called *helia.* It is introduced in microscopic quantities in gasoline—your petrol—and natural gas and many other burning fuels, including coal and diesel. There is nowhere in the world—in the Western Countries, in Russia and China, in the newly emergent nations—where *helia* is not used. It has the effect of giving each fuel a greater intensity of heat—greater performance in every way. Each major gasoline company has a different name for it. Some had the first use of it, others have been allowed to use it at various times. It has given to the traditional fuels a real opportunity to compete in efficiency and cheapness with nuclear power. It is used on board ships and on aircraft, on automobiles and in trucks as well as many forms of domestic heating. I tell you, David, it is one of the great discoveries of the age. Geoffrey Drummond was one of a number of chemists, and physicists involved, each doing a different job.” Storr began to walk about the patio, and the speed with which he talked increased until his voice became almost staccato.

Costain listened and watched with increasing horror.

“For years we had no reason to suspect there could be any harmful side effects. We refined and improved *helia.* We have in our laboratories concentrations which would treble the mileage performance of most gasolines, for instance. We did not release these ultra-effective variants, we were keeping them for staggered sale to industry. I have a dozen companies, the stock of which I own, competing against one another, simply to increase the margin of profit. Oh, I am a very fine businessman. I am Croesus and Rockefeller and Onassis, and Howard Hughes, Paul Getty and Charles Clore

rolled into one. I have a mind which can calculate how to amass money better than any man in the world."

He was still pacing the patio.

His voice seemed to crack, now and again he swallowed a word as if his lips were too dry to utter it perfectly.

"And it has been my dream, as I told you, to use my wealth for the good of mankind. Now there is a great likelihood that I will bring about the destruction of mankind."

He stopped at last, in front of Costain, and went on with great deliberation: "And you can help me to prevent this thing."

Costain did not understand.

Marion had told him that he could help, as if she had meant it, and now Storr spoke as if he had no doubt of it at all. To him, Costain, there was no sense in the idea, he had nothing, knew nothing, could do nothing which – as far as he knew – could be of the slightest help.

Yet Storr's gaze turned with the same intensity of appeal as Marion's.

Were they – mad?

Were they trying to evade some of their own responsibility by placing a burden on him, one that he could not possibly carry?

Or – and this possibility flashed on him with blinding speed – were they mistaking him for someone else?

He did not speak at first although these thoughts passed through his mind so fast that there seemed no gap between Storr's words and the questions he asked himself. All the time, Storr's eyes were burning into his, and the possibility that this man was mad entered his head again. He hardly knew what made him say quite mildly: "If there is any way I can help, of course I will."

"There is a way," Storr stated.

"Then for God's sake what is it?"

"Would you risk your life to help?" Storr asked very softly.

"If I were convinced that it would do any good, of course I would," answered Costain, quite matter-of-factly.

"I think I can convince you," Storr said in a low pitched voice. "I want you to send word to Palfrey, before the testing. I want you to tell him exactly what I am going to tell you. That at Sane, I was working on the development of an air purifier—something which could be used to counteract the harm of *helia.* First, you need to know that the effect of *helia* is very simple. At some time, we do not yet know when, it concentrates the sulphur and carbon monoxides in the air so that the oxygen is virtually dried up and man and beast cannot breathe. This process is quickened in daytime by the effect of the sun's rays, making photo-chemical smog, as it is known, of killer density. We have never been able to find out how long the *helia* has to be in the atmosphere before the concentration takes place. We know it is connected with degree of *helia* content, atmosphere, temperature, wind—as with all known smog concentrations, the worst effects are on calm days when there is no movement of air at all. If we could find an additive which

would cancel out the effect of *helia,* then the problem would be solved. Are you following me?"

"Closely," said Costain.

"We have a dozen experimental research laboratories where we are seeking this additive. One of the small research stations was at Sane. Another, at Mountview in Wyoming. Yet another is in Russia in a small town in the Urals—one of the major Russian petrol refining regions where Russia began in all good faith to use *helia.* The degree of concentration in the atmosphere in most parts of the world is increasing at an alarming rate—we know that it is due to the *helia,* we don't know and have no way of telling at what stage the concentration becomes lethal. Geoffrey Drummond came as close as anyone to finding the additive. Under my instructions he quickened the pace of the research. He believed—we all had reason to believe—that we were near success. On the day of the disaster *he* tried a final experiment—and instead of cancelling out the *helia* it concentrated it to a degree far greater than we had ever known."

Storr paused; he seemed hardly able to draw breath enough to utter the words, but Costain was so held by the story that he could not speak even to urge the other on.

"Everyone in the village of Sane had been used as an unwitting guinea pig. You lived, worked, breathed in an atmosphere which we believed would immunise you-inoculate, vaccinate, whatever you will—against the effects of the *helia.*"

"You know the absoluteness of the failure," Storr added bitterly. "But what you do not yet understand is that *you* are the only person alive and well who has become acclimatised to that atmosphere. The Mountview disaster was due to accidental release of *helia,* so was the Russian disaster, but Sane was not accidental in the same sense. Sane was an experiment which went wrong. There is reason to believe that here, in our laboratory in this mountainside, we have discovered what went wrong. The experiments were taking place simultaneously … every step was carried out at the same time and in the same conditions. They must be tried again. The only subject on whom we can carry out the breathing or respiratory tests, the blood tests, all the physical and mental tests, is you."

Storr paused, and with slowly increasing horror, Costain began to understand the significance of his words.

"I want you to tell Palfrey these things," Storr went on.

"And I want you to submit yourself to the tests, which may take a week, may even, particularly if they are successful, take longer."

"Will you, David?"

On this man's lips the question was like a prayer.

Costain moved towards the protecting rail of the patio, looked out, and stared at the scene of breathtaking grandeur. The steam was rising more gently, a few clouds drifted, a few beasts moved.

He turned.

He saw Marion, Griselda, Philip and Harrison in the room beyond and

realised that they had been listening.

He had eyes only for Marion as he said: “Of course, I will. It goes without saying. When can we start?”

Chapter Seventeen

The Message

Palfrey walked along Piccadilly on a pleasant summer day.

It was the first time he had been out since he had returned from Winchester; the first time he had breathed air which was not air-conditioned since stepping into the Z5 Headquarters. He had an almost peremptory call, in his pocket, from Clitheroe. "*I would like to see you at once.*" First the Russians, now the English were behaving as if Z5 belonged to them. This was a new problem, one which he would have to cope with soon.

A pattern of unbelievably white clouds scudded across the deep blue of the sky. A gentle breeze blew across Green Park, sending the petrol and diesel fumes across Piccadilly into the side streets of Mayfair.

London was as lovely as she could be.

The women looked fresh and decorative in summer dresses, with that curiously eager, happy look which Englishwomen have when the day is warm enough for them to wear bright silks and cottons without feeling chill. An attractive woman, very like Joyce, walked towards him. She glanced at him with a gay, innocent invitation as they passed. At another time, on another day, whatever passed for fate might have made them stop and speak. What was there about this woman's eyes which attracted him when Joyce's didn't? The question teased him.

He saw another woman, tall and graceful, wearing a lemon coloured dress with slightly ruffled sleeves and a wide-brimmed hat. She looked in the distance as his wife Drusilla had often looked in their days of deep contentment, so long ago. They passed. He tried to prevent his eyes from nickering towards her but could not. There was some English quality about her, clear-skinned, clear-eyed, with a kind of disdain about her lips; perhaps, aloofness.

They passed.

The one was not like Joyce nor the other like Drusilla; it was his loneliness that had made him think they were.

He saw yet another woman as he turned into the Park, tall and clean-limbed, athletic-looking, sharp featured, and for a moment he thought she was Griselda Kemble. He actually missed a step. She walked past, and he did not think she had even noticed him.

He smiled a little ruefully to himself, his thoughts passing from Griselda to Storr.

He knew exactly where they were. A dozen messages had come in as their aircraft had flown across the northern states of the United States of America. They had actually been pin-pointed on a map, in a valley not far from Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons, country of grandeur and beauty which he had seen twice and could remember with vividness. It was named Pale Valley. There were aerial photographs of several chalets, of a

landing strip near a lake, and all the reports from the authorities in America said that the valley was almost inaccessible except by foot or on horseback – and, these days – by air. There was one brief military report.

> There is only one accessible landing strip and any aircraft using it would be vulnerable from any antiaircraft weapon placed in any position within range.

There was another:

> Landing by helicopter would be extremely dangerous since Pale Valley itself, and the mountains surrounding it, is a geyser and hot springs area. Except to those who know the terrain well and can pick their way on hard ground between geyser areas and mud-hole areas, there could be no safety of approach. The earth's crust is extremely thin and brittle in most places in such areas – as in the geyser areas in Yellowstone National Park, which it greatly resembles. A helicopter could land and sink in boiling mud without a trace.
>
> Obviously, this is also true of parachute troops.
>
> Any raid on the Valley will occasion an extremely high proportion of casualties, then, and there are at this juncture no known ways of raiding the valley successfully. Reconnaissance is being maintained unceasingly. Arapahoe indians and trappers and a few white prospectors know some of the trails and contact is being made with them.
>
> No speedy means of entry or take over is likely at any time.
>
> Stephen Storr, who owns the Valley and the whole area, retains some kind of occupancy during the winter and is believed to be prospecting for uranium or other metals. Storr is reputedly the wealthiest …

Palfrey did not need any further reminders about Storr; he had to only go over everything he knew in his mind in an almost despairing attempt to see a way in which he could get into the Valley. The fact that he had sent Costain was the ray of light, the one cause for hope – and he could not even be sure that Costain was trustworthy. But he had done the only thing possible, he had no shadow of doubt about its wisdom.

He reached the tall, gilded iron gate, which opened onto the driveway in front of Buckingham Palace. In the beds in front of the Palace gates geraniums glowed in vivid scarlet against the soft, beguiling green. Crowds of sightseers, their cameras loaded and ready, were gathering thickly, for the changing of the guard would soon begin. Traffic, controlled by policemen who already looked too hot, moved very slowly.

Palfrey turned into the Mall, and could not resist looking back, to see the

squat solidity of the Palace with the Royal Standard and the Union Jack fluttering as if with remembered proudness. Something about the thought stung him, and he turned and walked more briskly away. He could remember the pride and the glory of Churchill's Britain during and just after the Second World War, and he contrasted it bitterly with the present attitude of standing aside and watching helplessly so much that was going wrong with the nation which had sired him.

He was as English now as he had been in those proud days.

He was as sure now of the need for peace and justice and the true freedoms for all mankind, as he had been then.

He had been that mocked-at thing: an idealist.

He *was* an idealist.

But the nations still waged war or threatened wars, or used their military or their economic strength to blackmail weaker nations.

There were three men or women or children starving for each who was well fed. There was hate and greed, avarice and prejudice, Jew and Gentile, Arab and Israeli; East German and West, American Negro and American white man, Englishman and Rhodesian – all enemies, many hating one another and often having cause to hate. This was the world he had spent his life trying to help …

No: in helping!

If Drusilla were alive –

How was it that today he remembered her so vividly, she who was ten years dead? How was it that he could 'hear' and 'see' her, and feel her sustaining love, her wisdom and her faith in man. It was almost as if she were speaking, now, an inner voice.

"But Sap, look how much better off the world is … Think how people hate war … Think how even the great nations *try* to work together … Think how black and white, yellow and red, Arab and Jew, *do* sit round the same table and talk … Remember how much *is* settled by discussion, today … And Sap, think how many disasters you and Z5 have averted."

Her voice seemed to fade.

He went into St. James's Park, where the deck chairs were already out and the children playing. The rare ducks from distant lands were warming their lovely coloured feathers in the sun, and all was beauty and contentment and, among the people, peace.

Drusilla was right, the lot of the many was much better, and unless some dreadful disaster struck –

Some trick of wind brought a whiff of car exhaust to his nostrils, and quite suddenly, awfully, he walked in fear. And the fear was harsh and heavy upon him as he neared the Horseguards and Downing Street and Whitehall. There the Home Secretary would soon be waiting for him.

He heard a tiny whistle of sound – as if out of the air.

But it was not out of the air, it was from his wrist watch, his call signal from the office.

He touched the winder of the watch, and raised his arm.

"Palfrey."

"There is an urgent message for you, Dr. Palfrey … Please hold for Miss Morgan."

"I am holding."

There was in fact hardly a pause, before Joyce said almost breathlessly: "Sap—there's a message from David Costain, in Pale Valley."

His heart almost stopped beating, not only because of the message but because of the excitement in her voice; and only an epoch-making message would allow Joyce to reveal excitement.

"What is it?" he asked tensely.

"It's too long to read. There is a messenger on the way with a teletype copy. It will be at the Whitehall end of Downing Street in five minutes."

"I'll be there. Is it good or—"

"Sap," she said, "if it's true, the only hope we have of saving the world from the pollution is in David Costain *or* Grace Drummond."

"But there *is* a hope?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes. Just a hope."

He thought: Thank God. He said: "Warn Clitheroe that I might be late. Send a copy of this to Stefan."

"One is on the way to him," Joyce said.

"Ah," said Palfrey, "I should have known. I'll call you when I've read the message. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

He pushed the winder back, staring towards the massed buildings of Downing Street and beyond, now hardly aware of the summery dresses and the casual air of most of the people. Two trucks came along too fast, and the stench of fumes dragged him out of his reverie. The engine of one of a long line of parked cars started, belching out blue fumes, and stinking with the smog it created. He watched the car move off.

He saw a small sports car draw up and recognised a fair-haired youth at the wheel, an agent named Collins; a youth with the coolest courage Palfrey had ever known. He pulled up alongside Palfrey, looking like an eager boy.

"Here we are, sir. How are you?"

"Hopeful," said Palfrey, taking the proffered envelope.

With steady hands Palfrey slit it open.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"There may not be very much time left, as things are shaping at the moment. Life, I mean." In spite of the almost magnetic pull of the letter, Palfrey found himself looking into Collins' glowing eyes. "I'd like a final fling."

"Such as?"

"Very volcanic that part of the world, I gather. Not the easiest place to land. If you need anyone to have a shot at putting down a light plane or a chopper, or chuting down, may I have first refusal?"

Palfrey found himself between tears and laughter.

"What would make you refuse?" he asked.

"The knowledge that you might want to go in first," Collins answered. "Might be as well to have someone pave the way, sir."

"Ah," said Palfrey. "We'll see. And thank you. I can't think of anyone I'd rather be with." He moved towards the park, where there were wooden seats. "Wait in case I want to send a message back, will you? Or need a lift?"

"Of course."

Palfrey sat down, the soft breeze gentling his silky hair. Children were playing near; a man and woman were sitting at the far side of the seat, the man's arm round the woman's waist. Aircraft flew high above them, the distant drone accompanying the fluttering of ducks and nearby pigeons as they pecked at crumbs thrown encouragingly by half a dozen idlers.

He opened the message, and read every word.

It was exactly what Storr had said to Costain with one short paragraph added:

> No one else can possibly hope to find the gas we need, and if you – or any nation or any authority – seek out and destroy the laboratories where Storr is working, there will be no hope at all. Will you do nothing – and persuade all the authorities to do nothing – until the experiment here is finished and we know what hope is left.

Palfrey looked almost blindly at young Collins, who was sitting at the wheel pretending to read a newspaper.

Cold courage – Collins – Costain.

He stood up slowly, and Collins watching out of the corner of his eye, put the newspaper down.

"Good or bad, sir?"

"I don't know. Tell Joyce to ask the Prime Minister if I can have ten minutes at the morning Cabinet meeting. Tell Joyce I am going to ask the British Government to suspend all research and investigation, and ask her to telephone Stefan Andromovitch to put a similar request to the Soviet Government. Oh, and have two of our fastest aircraft ready to fly to Pale Valley, non-stop. You can pilot one—we'll need pilot, co-pilot and, say, two passengers in each plane. Professor Erasmus Smith with me, someone else in another. Be ready to take off at twelve noon."

"*Whoopee!*" cried Collins, and started the engine with a roar.

As Palfrey watched him go, he smelt the stench of the exhaust. It seemed stronger than any he had known before.

Chapter Eighteen

The Reply

"But dammit, Palfrey," expostulated Clitheroe, "if you wanted a hearing at a Cabinet meeting, you should have made the approach through me. I am the Minister dealing with this particular problem."

He looked, thought Palfrey, like an indignant rabbit.

"*Surely* you understand that."

"No," said Palfrey, sitting in a luxuriously panelled office in front of an enormous pedestal desk. "I don't agree at all. You forget, Minister, that I am not a servant of the crown."

"But as an Englishman—"

"I don't serve this country only, sir. I serve people of all nations. I am authorised to deal directly and personally with the heads of governments, and am now conferring with you as the representative of the British Government on Home Affairs. This is no longer a matter of Home Affairs."

"Then why did you come here?" demanded Clitheroe, crossly.

"As a matter of courtesy, Minister," Palfrey said gently. "And I shall hope for your support."

"If you would give me details in advance, I—" Clitheroe broke off as the door opened and a youngish man entered, his manner almost that of an acolyte before a priest. "I said I was not to be disturbed," Clitheroe rebuked pettishly.

"The Prime Minister says that the Cabinet will meet in five minutes, sir to hear a statement from Dr. Palfrey."

"Oh, I see. Yes. Very well." Clitheroe waited until the door was closed, and then stood up. "I am not at all sure that I am happy about your position, Palfrey." Palfrey also stood up and they moved towards the door. "Either you are an Englishman, with the proper loyalties, or—"

"Minister," interrupted Palfrey, "if I abide by the conventional loyalties to Britain, London could be wiped out as surely as the village of Sane. If I accept a broader allegiance, there is a chance of saving not only London, but the major cities of the world."

Clitheroe, staring at him, closed the door and silently led the way down the narrow staircase of Number 11, Downing Street. A servant opened the door. A police sergeant stood immediately outside, while a number of other policemen made a crescent around the doorway of both houses. At each end of Downing Street, more police were forming cordons, while crowds of people craned their necks and stood on tiptoe to see what was going on.

The door of Number 10 opened.

"Palfrey," said Clitheroe, in a subdued voice, "this is all too much for me. I—er—accept your broader loyalties, of course, but I am simply an Englishman. I can't help my own limitations."

"There isn't the slightest reason why you should, sir," Palfrey said.

They went inside, and into the Cabinet Room.

Palfrey was almost as familiar with it as with his own room. The length of the table, the panelling, the austerity, the men sitting at their places—twenty-one he saw, including Sir Norton Bray, the Prime Minister, at the head of the table. Clitheroe bobbed as if to an altar and took one of several vacant chairs. Bray half rose from his seat.

"Good morning, Dr. Palfrey. I understand your statement is one of great urgency. Sit or stand, as you prefer. We are all vitally interested and anxious to know what you can tell us."

Palfrey moved to a vacant chair at one end of the table, but did not sit down. He placed his hands on the back of the chair and began to speak.

"I am extremely grateful, Prime Minister. There has been a development, an unexpected, a grave one, but not without hope, in fact with some built-in reassurance. We are not under threat from any hostile group—nor is any nation. We …"

He told them exactly what there was in the message, and there was utter silence as he spoke; when it was done, he passed his copy along to the Prime Minister, who placed it on one side and said quietly: "I am sure you have omitted nothing of significance, Dr. Palfrey. And I am equally sure that you expect us to understand the full implications of the message. A few days ago you asked us to recommend to all nations that they intensify their efforts to find the cause of the alarming increase in the smog content of the atmosphere. Now, you desire us to support a different recommendation—that no action be taken until there is further word from—" he glanced down at some notes he had made, and added: "Professor Storr. Do I understand you correctly?"

"You do indeed, sir."

"I see. Do you know what the alternative is?"

"One investigating team, believing itself to be near success, and out of sheer ignorance, might bring about a catastrophe in a major city or cities."

The Prime Minister glanced round at his colleagues, severe-looking men markedly professorial in manner, and said generally: "I imagine that I voice the opinion of most of us here when I say that the man Costain, about whom so little is known, might have been deceived by Storr." He turned to Palfrey. "You appear to have been persuaded that Storr can be believed. Clearly, he could be lying: he could be asking you and the nations to suspend their investigation so that he can strengthen his own position to a point of dominance."

"In other words," put in Ogden, the bearded, bespectacled Foreign Minister who looked (and often talked) like an Old Testament Prophet, "Storr may be a megalomaniac who has world domination at heart and be using Palfrey to gain time. His story may have a basis of truth and yet be a concoction of lies."

Palfrey was twisting some strands of hair about his forefinger.

"It may indeed," he said.

"You admit that?" Ogden boomed.

"You realise that?" another man said.

"Of course," said Palfrey briskly, and he untwisted the hair and patted it down. "If he's lying, he's gaining a little time. If he's telling the truth, he needs time and must have it. If we refuse his request we may bring disaster down on many world cities. So—I think we should accede to what he asks, while using this opportunity of finding out the truth to the utmost."

"And how will you do that?" squeaked Clitheroe.

"By going there myself," said Palfrey, "and making it a condition of our recommendation to the nations that I may go in person. I have already made arrangements to leave at twelve noon. I have also recommended that the second-in-command of Z5 ask his government to add their voice to yours in support of the new proposals."

After a brief pause, the Prime Minister said: "You mean Andromovitch of Russia?"

"Yes, sir."

"You cannot possibly believe that the Kremlin—" began Ogden, but his voice had lost much of its resonance, and fell away to a whisper as he repeated: "You cannot possibly believe that the Kremlin would agree."

"We should soon know," Palfrey said. "I have asked Andromovitch to put it to the Presidium as quickly and urgently as possible."

Stefan Andromovitch was a huge man; among a crowd, even of big people, a giant. There were those who said that his features were too big for him to be called handsome, but many looked into his face and had a strange sensation, almost of awe. Even those steeped in prejudice against everything and everyone Russian had been known to say: "It is like looking on the face of a saint."

Others, less dramatic, would simply say: "This man is good."

He had worked with Palfrey during the war when the Allies had needed a secret service in the common interest. He had been the liaison between Moscow and the West when Moscow had suspected that Z5 watched only the interests of the Western Powers. He had been the man who, talking to a secret session of the Warsaw Pact Countries, had persuaded them that Z5 was as vital to Russia and Communist nations as to the West, since both sides had common enemies and, on some issues, must join in common cause.

Now, he towered over the meeting of the Party Presidium. Only seven were present, one of their number being in Pekin in a desperate effort to find a bridge between Pekin and Moscow. But Zobovkin, the Chairman, was there, in the middle of the seven, a bull of a man whose thick neck seemed to flow into his broad shoulders, and who looked like Karl Marx reborn.

Stefan talked – as Palfrey talked in Downing Street – briskly and lucidly, and after he had stopped there was a long, and what could so easily be a frightening, pause. There were the hawks and the doves on the bench before him; there were no fools but there were men who, out of prejudice, could act like fools. As each one of them looked at him he showed no change of expression, standing without the slightest movement, even of his lips; but

his heart was thumping and he felt icy cold.

Afterwards, he said to Palfrey: “It was as if I were standing there on trial for treason; and they were the judges.”

It was Zobovkin who broke the silence.

“What if this man Storr is a tool of the West?”

“There is nothing to suggest he is any man’s tool, comrade.”

“He is said to own the wealth of a nation.”

“He may also hold our safety and the world’s safety in his hands.”

“What will you do, if you find he is lying to you?”

“I will come back and tell you that I was wrong,” Stefan said.

“By then it may be too late.”

There was another long pause, while each man stared accusingly and Stefan felt as if all hope were dying. But he did not look away from Zobovkin as he said clearly: “If we delay much longer, it may already be too late. Surely it is better to have a chance in a million than no chance at all.”

That was when Zobovkin dismissed him to wait outside for the Presidium’s decision. And he was there, looking through a small, barred window out at the Armory with its priceless collection, when he was sent for.

“An aeroplane is waiting at the airport for you,” Zobovkin said. “Talk, first, to Palfrey.”

“We will meet at Yellowstone Park airport,” Palfrey decided, “and make our plans from there. And I’ll send word by radio that we are coming and want free entry into the Pale Valley. We should know Storr’s reply *en route.*”

“Palfrey is coming,” Storr said, “with the Russian, Andromovitch, and we shall make them welcome. But we can’t afford to wait for them, David. We have to begin our experiments with you now.”

“If we have to begin them, let’s begin.” Costain showed neither fear nor pleasure.

“Be ready to leave here in half an hour,” Storr said. “Marion will tell you what to do.”

Chapter Nineteen

The Testing Chambers

Marion.

She was with him in the chalet in which he had lived for the past two days. She had spent much of the time with him, although they had had most meals with the others in another, longer chalet in this same hillside.

Talking very little about themselves, they had formed a kind of friendship, or companionship. She had passed on a lot of information since Storr had told him what he wanted. He knew that the research laboratories were built into the mountainside, just above the geyser level of the valley. A long series of natural caves had been turned into a tunnel, and in these a dozen test chambers had been built, each containing certain concentrations of *helia,* each carefully studied and controlled.

"Some of the concentrations have been measured by instruments and chemical tests. Some have been tried on animals; some, on human beings," Marion had told him.

"How did you get the human beings?" he had asked.

"They volunteered," she had answered. "The risk was far less than yours, and they received substantial danger money."

She had shown him models of the chambers, and how they were approached from the chalet and from shacks which looked like hunting cabins. In the summer as many as thirty chemists and physicists worked there, in the winter perhaps only four.

"And the testing chambers are virtually inaccessible except from the lake," she said. "They can be reached only by iron staircases or by chair lifts."

"But why the secrecy?" he had demanded.

"Stephen believed it to be essential," she had told him. She seemed almost to reverence Storr.

"Now," she said: "David, you know you may not come back, don't you?"

"Of course," he said.

"And it doesn't worry you?"

"It doesn't make me wish I weren't going if that's what you mean," he said. "Don't make a hero out of me, Marion."

"No hero," she said, almost in anguish, and closed her eyes, then opened them again and said in a lighter tone: "Have you thought about the future if you do come back?"

"No," he said. "Not really."

"Have you been afraid to?"

"In a way, yes."

"David, you've lived in the past too long."

"I'm not living in the past now," he said positively. "I won't again. Marion —" he felt strangely calm and strangely sure of himself, "whenever I catch a

glimpse of the future, I see you with me."

Her eyes lit up, and for the first time they held each other, almost fiercely, longingly; and he felt the warmth of her lips and the promise of her body.

And they drew apart.

"David," she said in a faint voice, "I want to tell you what will happen now. Stephen or Arthur would have told you, but I wanted to."

"Yes," he said.

"There are the twelve main chambers, each with a series of smaller inner chambers."

"Yes."

"All have a different concentration of *helia* and carbon and sulphur oxides," she said. "And daylight has been simulated to create the smog. If we have found the right additive for all the different concentrations, then you will come out alive. If we haven't—"

"All right," he said gruffly. "How sure are you?"

"Stephen is nearly sure. If we fail—"

"Everything fails." He moved towards the railing, and saw a motor-launch coming across the lake. "How long will the whole test take?"

"Seven days at least," she said.

"I've never been a chemist," he remarked, and then added: "I mean, I've never been interested in it. Odd that I should be—" he broke off. "Stephen won't harm Palfrey, will he?"

"He won't harm anyone provided they don't try to interfere. David, please try to understand. Stephen is a great humanitarian. No one could ever count the good he's done, the money he's given to the great foundations and to charities. He worked for the advancement of man, and in doing so, created by chance the devil which may destroy man. It is bad enough simply as a situation but he must feel possessed by a thousand devils, all tearing at his vitals."

Costain said slowly: "Yes. Yes, I can understand."

He saw that it would do no good to denigrate Storr, suggest that money-making was his chief concern, and that there would have been no need for the excess of tardy humanitarianism if he had not thrown an insufficiently tested product on the world. "Marion—"

"Yes."

"What is he to you?" When she didn't answer immediately, he went on: "What has he been?"

"Everything," she said.

"Must you evade the question?"

"He has been everything that is kind and good," she repeated. "I first met him when, as the daughter of a close business associate, I worked with the Storr Foundation. Griselda already worked there. So did Arthur Harrison. Philip came in much later. We were all—partners in the *helia* experiments. This whole valley is overflowing with rock and ore. We found another deposit in New Zealand, in the South Island; there is probably a deposit in

the Himalayas and of course there may be others. We believed when we began that it would lower the price of all fuels and so make all commodities cheaper and more plentiful. And, God forgive us, we thought that it would cleanse the air. What went wrong, where we went wrong, we don't yet know."

"But if I live, you will find out," Costain said gruffly.

They stood close together for a few moments, and then Stephen Storr came into the living room, and a bell rang from the landing stage.

Storr came onto the patio.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," said Costain.

They went to a door at the side of the house and for the first time he saw the chair lift from here to the lake itself; Marion came to the lift with them; it was a two seater and obviously she wasn't coming down. She gripped his arm as he stepped in, and he saw the tears in her eyes.

He found himself smiling at her.

Then Storr sat in and locked the safety bar, pressed a button, and the descent began.

From that moment it seemed to Costain that the world he knew was slipping away from him. He had no thought of death, but only of the beauty of the valley and the strange stillness everywhere. It was as if he were descending into infinity. At every stage the blue of the lake and the white of the mountain peaks, the colour of the trees and the darkness and the shape of the shadows cast by the clouds changed, each time to a greater beauty so that even thought and fear were lost in a wonder which seemed to have no end.

Soon, as a jutting crag of granite fell away from view, he could see the valley of steam – the Pale Valley of mist which could hold the secret between life and death. He saw a sheer fall of at least five hundred feet, and below this a beach of pale sand, two small jetties, another motor launch and what looked like a chair lift going up the face of the cliff. Then other crags and a patch of dark ponderosa pines hid this from view.

He did not see it again until he was in the launch. A sun-bronzed young man gave him a hand into it, but Storr lowered himself without help. He sat next to Costain as they headed for the cliff.

"The testing chambers are at the top of that cliff," he said. "Did Marion tell you what will happen?"

"Yes."

"If you should have breathing difficulty in any conditions we will try to —"

"Stop it." Costain said roughly. "You haven't told me what Palfrey said."

"The recommendations have gone through. His, London's, Moscow's—and, I have just learned, Washington's. We have gained time for your experiment."

"Enough time?" demanded Costain.

"I think when Palfrey sees the research station and the laboratories—and

when Dr. Erasmus Smith, an expert who is with him, studies our meters and our control—they will make sure we have enough time."

Costain nodded, and then asked: "Will you look after Grace Drummond?"

"In every way I can," promised Storr.

The launch was moving swiftly but with little noise across the deep blue waters of the lake. There was scarcely any wind, the surface was hardly rippled. The great granite face of the cliff rose almost sheer above them as the pilot manoeuvred so that they could climb onto the jetty. Here, the smell of 'exhaust fumes' was very strong. Costain climbed on to the jetty. Blue jays flashed past him like metallic rockets. He saw the chair lift, large enough for two, looked upwards and felt dizzy as he craned his neck to see the top of the cliff.

Soon, he and Storr began to move upwards.

The lake and mountains, peaks and steam-filled valley lay before him with a beauty which seemed to show in one stupendous panorama everything he had seen in single vistas before. He was hardly aware of the smooth movement of the lift. Soon, there was a jolting sound and he realised they were at the top. A platform was pushed out from the edge of the cliff. He saw that Harrison and Griselda were there, while Philip sat in his wheel chair, watching expressionlessly.

There was a ledge perhaps fifty yards wide, cut out of the mountain – and beyond were the tunnels. Outside, there were all the trappings of a small factory: stores, a transformer, petrol pumps, drums of oil, pieces of machinery. They did not pause but walked straight into the tunnel. Here, in daylight which was simulated at least as well as Palfrey's at Z5, was a huge laboratory which stretched against the side of the tunnel. A dozen white-smocked men were in there, behind glass, working. But now they were turning round, and a little man with a shock of red hair gave the thumbs up sign.

The group passed the laboratory and reached a smaller room, a mass of narrow pipes, electrical conduits, switchboards and generator. There was a faint throbbing of a petrol-fired engine. It carried Costain's thoughts back to the sound at Sane Manor – Drummond's motor, which everyone had believed was only making electricity for his house. In fact it was used for both purposes.

Until now, Costain had been aware of hardly any feeling, conscious only of a kind of numbness throughout his body. But now that he saw the feeder pipes and realised that they were carrying the *helia* into the gas-laden chambers, his heart began to thump.

Then, at last, he saw the testing chambers.

They ran along the wall, as the laboratory had done. Outside each were great meters, showing the degree of pollution or the freshness of the air. Each chamber was made of some material which had the clarity of glass; each was about twenty feet long, and he could see partitions in each.

Storr said: "When you step into the first, David, a glass screen will move to one side, this will carry you into a trap which in turn will take you into

the next cubicle. There is a seat in each, there are magazines and books. You may do anything you wish except move about quickly or do anything to make yourself breathe quickly or agitatedly."

Costain nodded understanding.

"You stay in each cubicle for an hour," Storr went on. "You will be warned when there are five minutes left in the cubicle you are in. Do you understand that, too?"

"Yes."

"After each period of an hour you will have fifteen minutes to drink or eat; you must not drink in the testing chambers themselves. At the end of each three and three quarter hours you will have a period for normal eating, washing, showering. During the entire test you will be under observation. If you feel the effects of the toxic air—of any smog signs at all—put your hands to your throat."

Costain said: "Can't we get on with it?"

"You are to go into that shower, undress, shower, put on bathing trunks you will find there. Afterwards you can start whenever you wish."

"Right," Costain said.

"Perhaps you should know this," Storr went on. "The chambers are in a tunnel cut by a river of scalding water. We call it Boiling River. We diverted it, and now it runs almost parallel with the chambers. *Helia* is present in the river water. That is what makes this a perfect testing place."

Costain said gruffly: "I'm glad something is perfect."

Soon, he was showered and ready. He could not stop his heart from thumping or the muscles in his neck from tightening, but it did not occur to him to hesitate or draw back. He saw the sliding doorway close to the shower and pressed a button marked *open,* waited for it to slide back, and stepped through.

This was an air trap, between the gas-filled cubicle and the outside air. The next sliding door led him into the first of the gas chambers.

He tried not to breathe too deeply or too heavily, but even so his breath came in shorter gasps, and when the door slid to behind him, he felt a moment of near panic, and turned, hands raised as if to batter down the door.

He stopped and stood rigid with his hands clenched, his chest heaving. Soon, he moved to the stool and picked up the newspapers. There was a London *Times,* three days old, telling the story of what had happened at Mountview.

His breathing eased, and became normal.

He read on.

In the chalet, sitting before a television set, Marion Kemble watched, saw the momentary panic and cried out in fear for David. And, her heart thumping at least as fast as his, she saw him settle down.

In his aircraft, already nearing the coast of North America, Palfrey had a

radio report, saying very simply: “Costain is in the testing chambers.”

“If he gets out alive,” said Erasmus Smith shifting in his seat across the gangway, “it will be a miracle. But you believe in miracles, Palfrey, don’t you?”

Chapter Twenty

The Vengeance

As the aircraft taxied in at the airport at Yellowstone, Palfrey tore his gaze away from the wonders of the land about them, astonished by the size of Yellowstone Lake and seeing, though he did not know it then, a sight much the same as he would see in Pale Valley. He saw a small group of people near a twin-engined jet passenger aircraft. A man and a woman stood close to this and he recognised Griselda Kemble and Arthur Harrison.

Palfrey's aircraft pulled up, near the small airport building.

Another – the one in which young Collins and three other Z5 men were flying – was still a speck in the distance.

Palfrey and Smith walked down the short flight of steps which was pushed close to the plane door, and almost at once Smith began to gasp for breath. Palfrey turned to him in concern.

"Don't worry—don't worry," Smith gasped. "Altitude. Always the same. Won't stop me—" he positively gulped for breath— "talking for long."

He followed Palfrey more slowly, as Harrison came towards them, the roar of the other jet making the air quiver and the ground shake.

"Dr. Palfrey," Harrison said, advancing awkwardly to Palfrey's outstretched hand, in which, after a moment's hesitation, he placed his own. "We are all ready to fly to the Professor, who asks me to tell you that the first six of a hundred and forty cubicles have been successfully tested."

"Six out—how many?" gasped Smith.

"One hundred and forty."

"My God!"

"It will take less than forty minutes to fly to the Valley," said Harrison, changing the subject. "I—ah—don't think that Professor Storr is expecting the second aircraft, is he, Griselda?"

She was watching it taxi towards them.

"No," she said. "Is everyone in your party to fly with us, Dr. Palfrey? Mr. Andromovitch is already with Stephen."

"No," Palfrey answered in turn, "the second aircraft will follow us, and constant surveillance will be kept while I'm in Pale Valley."

"You will be quite safe," she said, almost testily. The other aircraft stopped and Collins, wearing an open necked, short sleeved shirt and a Paisley pattern choker, and slacks, stepped out; he looked like a model for men's outdoor clothes, and his flaxen hair had a golden sheen. His gaze rested on Griselda in unfeigned admiration.

"All set, sir," he said to Palfrey.

"I must consult the Professor about this," Harrison said. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and did much as Palfrey had with his watch. "Professor, Dr. Palfrey has—"

"Let me talk to him," Palfrey suggested, and took the glasses from the old

man's hands. "Professor …" he told Storr what he proposed, and almost without hesitation Storr replied: "I have no objection at all."

"Good. How many tests has Costain passed now?"

"Another one cubicle. You understand that it will take several days, don't you?"

"Yes," said Palfrey, and he thought: Agonising days of waiting.

"Palfrey," Storr said abruptly.

"Yes?"

"Is Philip Montefiore with Mr. Harrison?"

"I haven't seen him," Palfrey said, and looked at Harrison. "Is Philip with you?"

"No," answered Harrison. "He stayed in the Valley."

"I heard that, thank you," Storr said. "Will you tell my pilot to watch the lake? Sometimes Philip takes a launch out by himself." After a pause he went on in a less worried voice: "I shall look forward to seeing you very soon. Goodbye."

Palfrey said: "Goodbye," and handed the glasses back to Harrison.

In five minutes they were airborne again; in ten, they were in sight of the Grand Tetons, and Palfrey felt the same almost hypnotic pull as Costain had felt in the chair lift. It was virtually impossible to feel the sense of urgency which had driven him here.

Costain put down a newspaper which had two fascinating articles, one on world population and the other on the origins of sport, stood up, and moved to the door of the eighth chamber. It slid open, and he stepped through.

The palpitations which followed were less vigorous than before; the fear of death remained but was less harsh.

He saw Philip Montefiore, some distance along, in his wheel chair, but gave no thought to that, knowing he would be watched every moment of his testing.

After a few moments, he sat down.

Palfrey stepped out of the aircraft on a landing strip along the shore of the lake, bemused by the beauty, dazzled by the sun's reflection from the snow, thoughtful at the sight of Pale Valley and both reassured and inwardly excited by the sight of Stefan, towering above Storr. There was bright eagerness in Stefan's eyes as he came forward. They shook hands. Stefan engulfed Palfrey's in both of his for a moment, and then drew back.

"Dr. Smith," Palfrey said, and Smith, still affected by the atmosphere, shook hands with Storr and then with Stefan. Overhead the Z5 aircraft roared, and dipped its wings; Collins was enjoying himself.

"Has Philip turned up?" Palfrey asked.

"No."

"There was no sign of him on the lake," Griselda said. "Would he be in the Valley?"

"Marion has gone to see," Storr told her, looking very straight at Palfrey.

“I am most concerned, Palfrey. Philip is a brilliant young man but too often unpredictable. He bitterly resents his incapacity, and I have heard him threaten to wheel himself into one of the pools. I—”

He broke off, at a peep of sound, a radio signal; and it came from his watch, as Palfrey’s had.

“Yes, Marion,” he said sharply.

Her voice came very clearly.

“Philip has been here, I can see the tracks of the chair’s wheels. But I can’t find him.”

“We will organise a comprehensive search at once,” promised Storr, “Goodbye.” He beckoned a man from the dinghy, and said: “We want all the launches quickly.” He turned to Palfrey: “You are welcome to come with us or to rest here.”

“I’ll come,” Palfrey said promptly.

“It is vital to keep to the paths—” Storr glanced at Stefan and went on: “There are large areas where the earth’s crust is so thin here that even a man of ordinary weight would sink. It would be instant death.”

“I will be very careful,” Andromovitch said mildly.

Costain stepped into the next cubicle.

Philip was still watching him, and, strangely, giving him a greater feeling of disquiet than the gas-filled cubicle itself, in which he was now sealed.

Two launches drew up at a landing stage close to the biggest of the geyser fields. Palfrey saw two places, under water, where boiling mud bubbled up into the cold of the lake. Close to the water’s edge, steam was rising in dense clouds. From a hundred feet up in the mountainside, boiling water first erupted, then fell, then trickled, steaming, into the lake. On each side there were colours of rich hues – gold, bronze, purple, green, blue. As they stepped out, a geyser erupted, not a hundred yards away, and a huge spout of water rose high into the air, and a great roar travelled along the surface of the lake.

They stepped on to the wooden stage.

Paths of rough-hewn logs led up the mountainside and into tunnels, pools of bubbling water looked like rainbows leading down into the earth. Circles of brown mud plopped and bubbled. A drifting log reached one of these circles and slowly sank, as if into quicksand. One large pool of water, fifty feet across, was like an enormous simmering saucepan.

Harrison said nervously to Andromovitch.

“Please—please keep to the middle of the path. If the edge crumpled we would all fall in. And if that happened—”

“We wouldn’t be seen again,” Griselda remarked, as if with macabre pleasure.

The path now led slightly uphill. The mud and water hissed and bubbled, while every so often a geyser blew with a deafening roar. Palfrey, who knew Yellowstone, and so was acutely aware of all the dangers, felt the thickness

of sulphur in his nostrils, making breathing difficult.

They turned a corner – and Marion stood at the entrance of a tunnel which oozed mud and from which scalding water poured. A little further along, a waterfall gushed, steaming, out of the wall of rock. This was where Boiling River had been diverted. Marion was peering into the tunnel, and saw them, and moved nearer.

"Philip's gone in there," she said in a harsh voice. "I think he's out of his mind. He—" She looked in almost unbearable distress. "He said he can get through to the test chambers this way and he's going to blow them up."

Then she said. "And David's in there."

Costain saw the steam, not far ahead: one chamber ahead, or two, perhaps three, cubicles from him. Philip was grinning. By the side of the wheel chair was a cloud of steam. Water was seeping through the sides of the tunnel, and he remembered that Boiling River ran almost parallel.

Philip was beckoning.

"Can we go round to the main entrance?" Palfrey asked urgently.

"There isn't time," Harrison told him. "The test chambers are only fifty or sixty feet from here, through the rock. I surveyed the rocks seeking a place for an air vent. But—I didn't think there was a path. It's damnably close to the new channel of Boiling River."

"If Philip went that way—" began Griselda.

"I saw him," insisted Marion. "*I'm* going."

"Marion, a single slip and you would be in that scalding water!" Harrison barked. "If you're right and Philip *is* going to destroy the test chamber, he's planning to divert the river back to the main tunnel."

"Can it be done?" demanded Palfrey.

"With one charge of explosive, yes. He would destroy himself and everyone near."

"He would destroy our hopes," said Storr, in a cold voice.

"*I must go*—" Marion cried.

"I am willing—" began Andromovitch.

"For God's sake! With your weight the path would crumble at every step." Harrison sounded terrified.

"Marion," said Storr, "I will go with Jensen—"

The man from the motor launch growled: "I'm not going in that hell hole for anything or anyone. Only a fool would try. If Philip went in there he's a skeleton by now, that water has the flesh off the bones in minutes."

"I don't believe he can have got through," Harrison said—and across his words there came another 'peep' Storr raised his watch.

"Professor Storr," he answered.

"Professor, there's something wrong," a man said in a clear voice. "Philip is in one of the inspection bays—the one near Boiling River. Costain's two cubicles away from him. I can see, but I can't get at the bay unless I change the concentration levels. If I do that Costain won't have a chance to finish

the tests and the testing chambers will be out of action for days. What do you want me to do?"

"Wait until he is at the loading bay," Storr said. "If there is an emergency cleanse the chambers. I am going in through Boiling River Cave."

"*My God!*" the other man said, aghast.

Costain had no idea what was going on, but Philip's expression made him feel more and more uneasy.

"Professor," Palfrey said equably, "Harrison is right, and Stefan is too heavy. So are you. If Miss Kemble and I go in, we should have the best chance of getting through." He smiled at Marion. "Shall we go?" It was as if he were asking for a dance.

In a strange, taut voice, Storr said: "You need to prevent Philip from using any explosive. He probably has a revolver which will fire an explosive charge into the wall of the inspection bay, and let the water through. If the river water does hit the test chambers—"

He broke off as Palfrey took Marion's arm and led her towards the steam-filled cave. As they went in the heat made Palfrey gasp, but soon he could see as well as breathe. He could see and hear the roar of Boiling River, in a channel on one side. There was a path along the wall, on the other side, away from the river, and he saw the tyre tracks, obviously recently made. He led the way. The river ran black and terrifically hot on his left. He brushed the inside wall with his shoulder, sensing that Marion was cringing back, too.

Just ahead, some of the path crumbled away and fell into the water, making no sound. Marion gasped. Palfrey stepped across the crumbling patch, turned, and helped her over. Their hands were wet with sweat and steam, their hair flat against their heads, their clothes moulded by steam to their bodies.

And the water boiled.

Then, he saw a light – a single electric lamp, burning. He heard Marion whisper: "*There he is!*" And there was Philip Montefiore, with a revolver in his hand, staring towards David Costain, who was inside the test chamber only ten feet away.

Philip was talking, like a demented creature.

"Come on, one more step and then you'll know what it's like to choke to death … One more step and there won't be any people left … one more step. *Come on!* My God, how I hate you. How I hate …"

Palfrey was now on firmer ground, only feet away from the maddened youth, the sound of his approach drowned by the rush of the scalding water. He reached the chair and, with infinite caution, stretched out his hand and took the gun away.

Philip screamed, and spun his chair round. The chair moved forward, slithering downhill towards the river and the steam. Marion, flattened against the wall, saw Philip going, saw the terror on his face as the chair

jolted, then tipped up, and pitched him into the river.

Costain, watching in stupefied horror, saw it all.

First Philip, then the chair, disappeared.

Next, he saw Palfrey, one arm round Marion's shoulders, making the thumbs up sign.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Final Message

"Message from Dr. Palfrey and Stefan Andromovitch from Pale Valley, United States.

> "To: Heads of States.
> "Experiments now concluded by Professor Stephen Storr into the concentration of noxious gases in the earth's atmosphere show highly encouraging results. An additive to all gasolines, all forms of petroleum fuels and natural and coal gas fuels will release a gas which will negative noxious concentrations during the next few days. Sufficient for all major cities will be available within one week. Strongly recommend immobilising all motor vehicles and oil-driven trains if the concentration in any city or town reaches danger point.
>
> "Good reason to believe that further experiments will introduce an additive to all fuels which will in future greatly reduce even today's normal toxic concentrations."

Joyce Morgan read the message, her heart racing, and began to send it out with the help of the young man in the Control Room. Within minutes it was being read by the Chairman of the Presidium of Soviet Republics, by the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, by heads of state throughout the world.

Grace Drummond read it as she sat, convalescing, in a nursing home belonging to Z5.

Newspaper editors read it and rushed it into print.

Every television and radio channel carried the message, word for word, at regular intervals during that golden day.

Everyone at Pale Valley watched a television relay, that afternoon, in a small theatre at the back of the chalet. When it was over, Palfrey moved to the front of the theatre, and said almost apologetically: "I hope I may have a few minutes to talk to you all. We know now that many of your efforts to find the answer to air pollution were thwarted by Philip Montefiore. We know that his mind as well as his body was infirm, that as he could not live a normal life, he turned his hatred on the world. It was he who blew up Sane Manor, and who began the holocaust.

"But we know also what Professor Storr has done to make amends for the first terrifying miscalculations that caused the catastrophes. He hoped to solve the problem without the world knowing he was responsible, only to fail utterly, killing many thousands of people. But it must be said that without him the problem could not have been solved. And I have learned, while I have been here, how many of you have been dedicated to the same

task. I am—ah—fortunate. I have the facilities to make sure that the world knows of this, and shall use these facilities to the full. And for a start I shall see that this little speech of mine is relayed to everyone who works in any of the Storr plants and depots."

Everyone began to clap.

Storr suddenly found himself surrounded by those who worked for him, by Costain, Marion and Griselda, young Collins.

Then Palfrey said: "And the world will soon know the part that David Costain played in this modern miracle. David—"

But David Costain and Marion had slipped away.

Later, Palfrey was alone with Andromovitch, who had received an amiably worded telegram of congratulation from Moscow, and who was sitting back, enormous and relaxed, on the patio. The aircraft engines were being given a final check, and the flight home would start within an hour.

Costain came in.

"Well, David," Palfrey asked him. "Do you still feel publicity shy?"

"Always was and always will be," Costain answered. "Er—I hope you won't think I'm letting you down, but there's a lot of work I can do here and I'd like to stay. I've been asked to take young Philip's place on the staff. Will that be all right?"

"My dear chap," said Palfrey, "if any man in the world has the right to do exactly what he wishes, you do."

Costain and Marion stood with Storr, Griselda and Harrison, watching the two aircraft take off. Both circled once, high above Pale Lake, and then flew between the mountain peaks towards the world beyond.

When they had disappeared, Costain turned with Marion towards the new world he had found.

Endnote

[1]In 'The Oasis'.

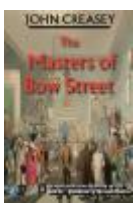
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street

This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*

2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

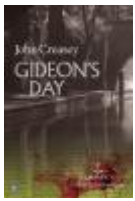
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

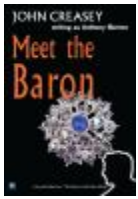


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

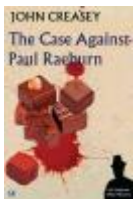


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

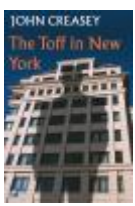
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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